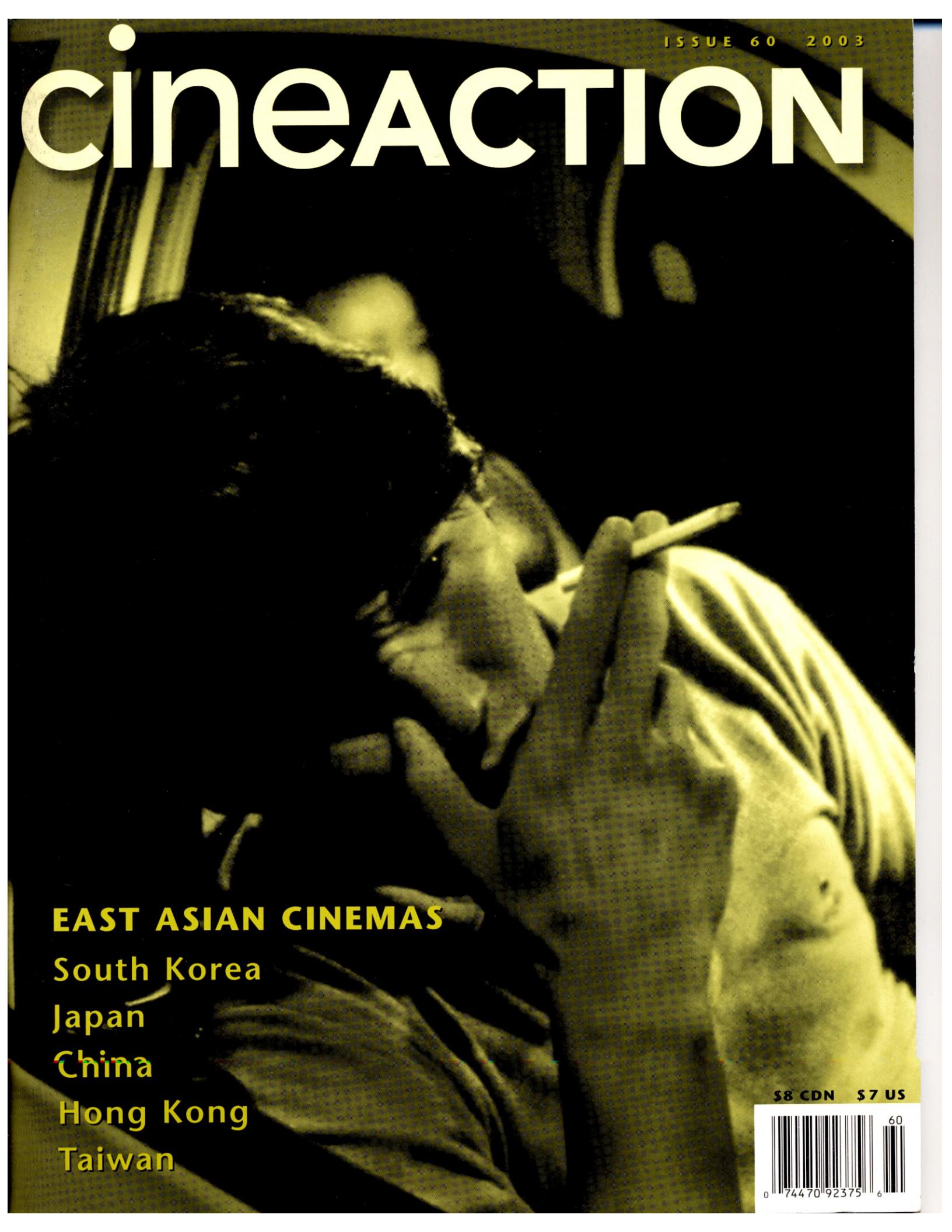


cineACTION



EAST ASIAN CINEMAS

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CineAction is published three times a year by the *CineAction* collective.**SINGLE COPIES**

\$8CAN \$7US

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

1 year subscription

Individual, 3 issues \$21

Institutions, 3 issues \$40

2 year subscription

Individual, 6 issues \$36

Institutions, 6 issues \$70

For postage outside Canada

US pay in US funds

Overseas add \$15 for 1 year,

\$25 for 2 year subscription

MAILING ADDRESS:

40 Alexander St., # 705

Toronto, Ontario

Canada, M4Y 1B5

Telephone 416-964-3534

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We would like to thank the Canada Council for their generous support.

CineAction is owned and operated by *CineAction*, a collective for the advancement of film studies. *CineAction* is a non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866

Printed and bound in Canada.

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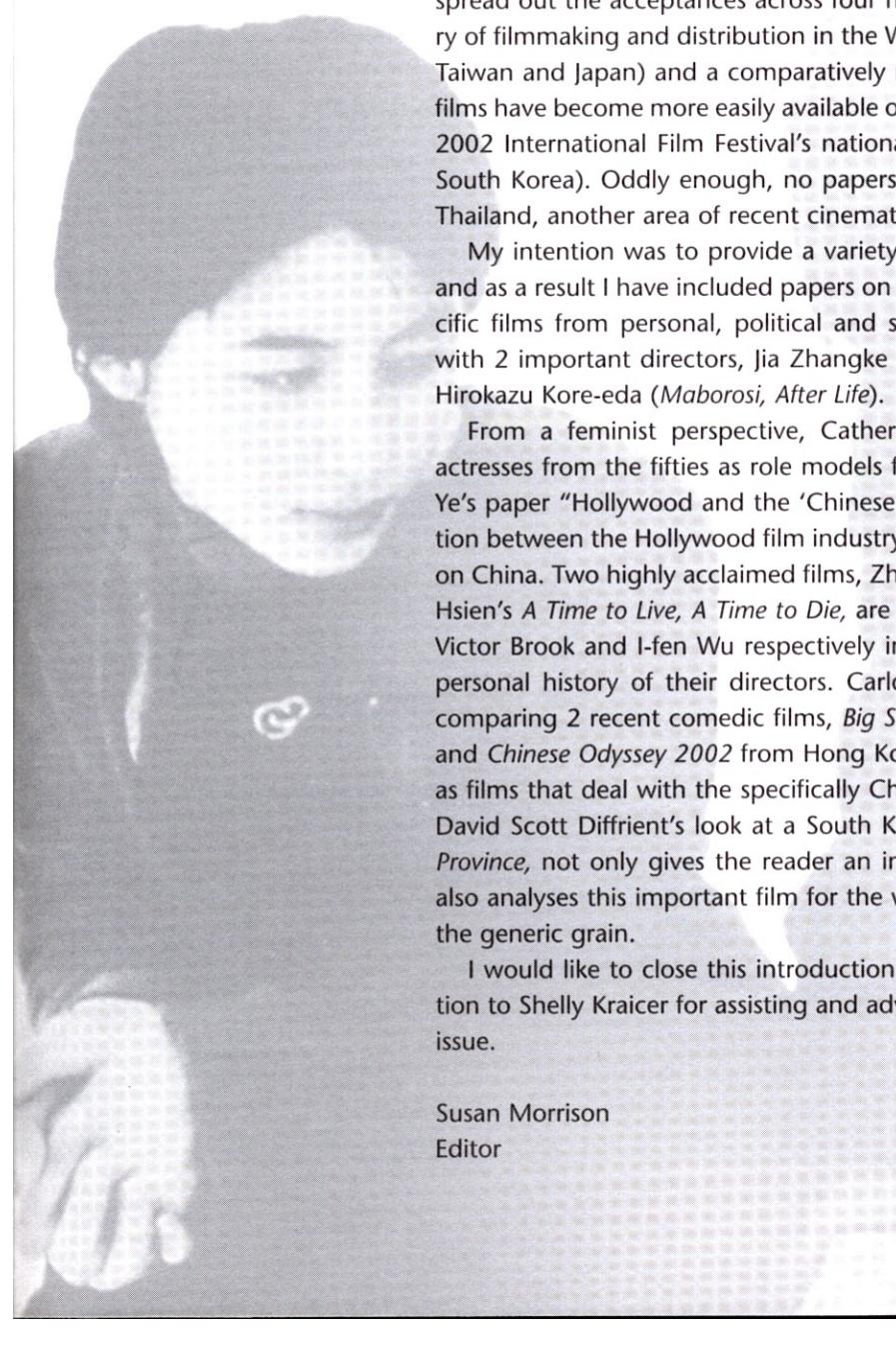
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EAST ASIAN CINEMAS



It is a sign of the times when a call for papers on Asian Cinemas produces an avalanche of proposals from a multitude of countries. In comparison, a few years ago, when I did an issue of *CineAction* on Chinese Films (#42), the response had been quite modest. Since then, the West's exposure to and interest in cinemas from the east has apparently grown exponentially. This naïve editor quickly learned the necessity to differentiate between East Asian filmmaking and films from ROA (the rest of Asia). *Mea culpa* when I had to turn down an otherwise intriguing paper about films from Kazakhstan, as well as articles on the more well-known South Asian films. Even with the narrower definition of East Asian films, I was compelled by the strict format of a 72 page magazine with photo illustrations (but no ads) to spread out the acceptances across four national cinemas with a long history of filmmaking and distribution in the West (Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and Japan) and a comparatively new one from South Korea whose films have become more easily available over the past decade (e.g. Toronto's 2002 International Film Festival's national spotlight focused on films from South Korea). Oddly enough, no papers were submitted about films from Thailand, another area of recent cinematic interest.

My intention was to provide a variety of approaches to cinema studies, and as a result I have included papers on the history of film, analyses of specific films from personal, political and social perspectives, and interviews with 2 important directors, Jia Zhangke (*Platform, Unknown Pleasures*) and Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Maborosi, After Life*).

From a feminist perspective, Catherine Russell writes on 3 Japanese actresses from the fifties as role models for the women of that period. Tan Ye's paper "Hollywood and the 'Chinese Other'" is about the interconnection between the Hollywood film industry and its reception in and influence on China. Two highly acclaimed films, Zhang Yimou's *Judou* and Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, are opened up and contextualized by Victor Brook and I-fen Wu respectively in order to set the films within the personal history of their directors. Carlos Rojas takes a different tack by comparing 2 recent comedic films, *Big Shot's Funeral* from mainland China and *Chinese Odyssey 2002* from Hong Kong both as 'New Year's films' and as films that deal with the specifically Chinese construct of the "Emperor". David Scott Diffrient's look at a South Korean film, *The Power of Kangwon Province*, not only gives the reader an introduction to Korean cinema but also analyses this important film for the way in which it can be read across the generic grain.

I would like to close this introduction by offering my deepest appreciation to Shelly Kraicer for assisting and advising me in the production of this issue.

Susan Morrison
Editor

A Tale of Two Emperors

MIMICRY AND MIMESIS IN TWO "NEW YEAR'S" FILMS FROM CHINA AND HONG KONG

by Carlos Rojas



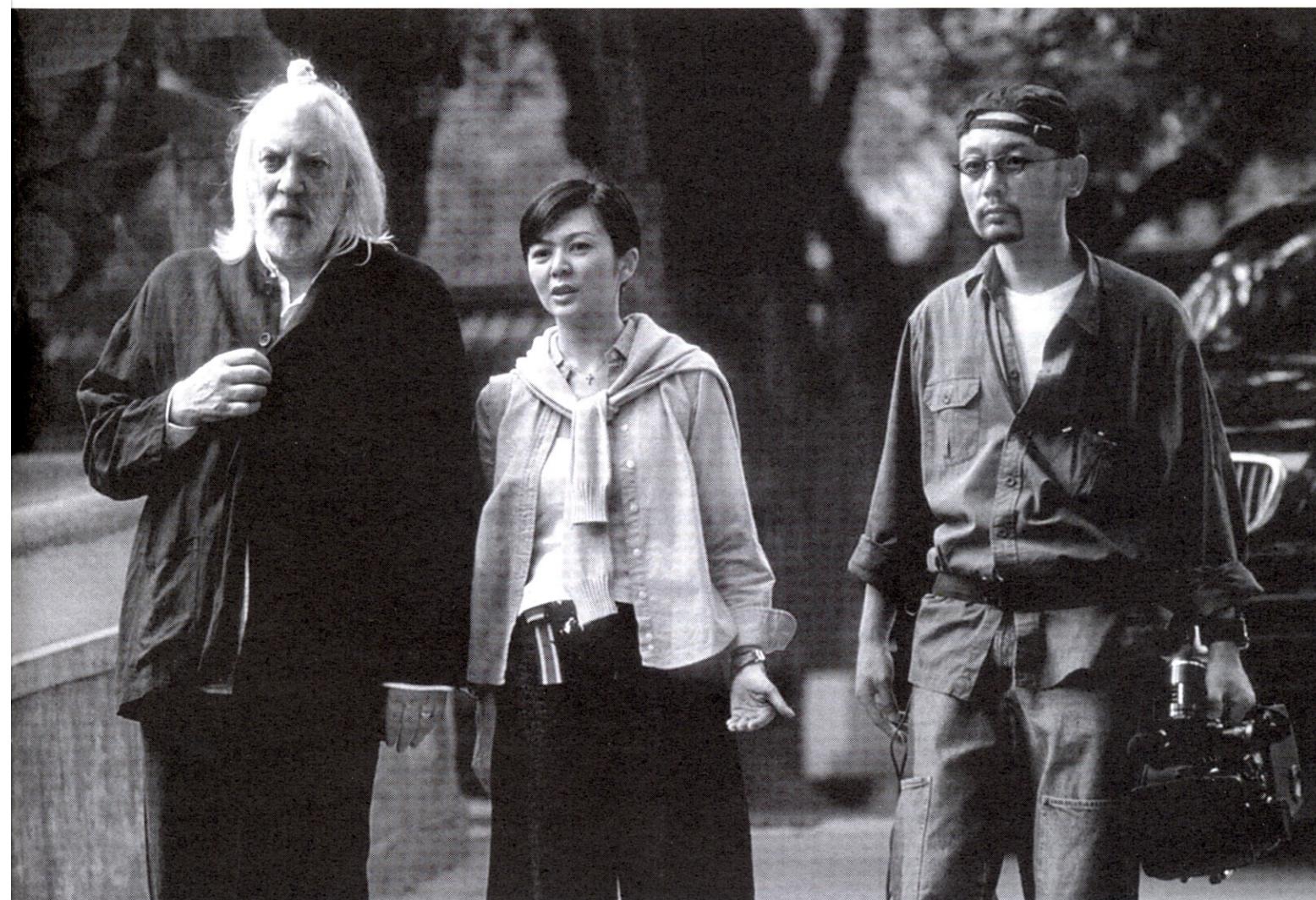
Since at least the mid-1990s, a sense of *fin-de-siècle* nostalgia has become apparent in many dimensions of Chinese culture, and one of the most iconic symbols of this nostalgia is the current fascination with early twentieth-century "calendar posters." Initially popularized by foreign tobacco companies as a marketing tool for their products,¹ these posters typically featured a richly illustrated image of either a traditional Chinese scene or a female beauty, and were often accompanied by a printed calendar together with advertisements for the commodities being promoted. Although these posters are a uniquely modern phenomenon, they are also in dialogue with two traditions in Chinese visual culture. On the one hand, the posters' tendency to feature images of attractive young women (dressed in either traditional or modern garb) borrows on the tradition of "beautiful woman pictures" (*meiren tu*), which featured idealized images of young women, including variations on legendary beauties from China's past. On the other hand, the theme of the calendar evokes the folk custom of "new year's pictures" (*nianhua*), which were typically hung in the home to celebrate the Chinese lunar new year. Furthermore, these contemporary calendar posters could be seen as drawing simultaneously on some of the specifically temporal connotations of each of these earlier two visual genres. While the "new year's pictures" explicitly signaled a moment of temporal transition from one year to the next, the "beautiful woman pictures," by contrast, implicitly have the opposite effect of celebrating a kind of timeless female beauty which defied temporal specification.² The early twentieth century calendar posters, meanwhile, simultaneously embrace both of these tendencies: their foregrounding of actual calendars serves as a salient reminder of chronological change,³ while their use of variations on the "beautiful woman" model would appear to suggest a more timeless, ahistorical perspective.⁴

Furthermore, these twin connotations of historical specificity and more atemporal repetitiveness are further reinforced by the fact that the calendar posters were not only explicitly

used to advertise specific commodities, but furthermore they themselves have become commodities in their own right. Commodities can be seen as both unique exemplars, as well as displaced copies of other commodities—embedded in a chain of commodity consumption, whereby any single commodity may be seen as a potential replacement of an earlier commodity which has already been consumed, as well as an anticipation of a future commodity which may similarly replace the current one. Indeed, the logic of modern capitalism is arguably premised upon treating each individual commodity *not* only as a unique exemplar, but also as being simultaneously embedded within a double logic of economic exchange—whereby each commodity represents both a displaced substitute of actual labor processes which produced it, while also implicitly anticipating its own impending obsolescence and potential future replacement.⁵ Furthermore, in contemporary China this link between the calendar posters and the commodity form has been given another twist, in that the posters have now become commodities in their own right, with a small industry being devoted to reprinting exact copies of a wide range of early-twentieth century posters (artificially aging the paper to make them seem more authentic), and then selling them to tourists and others.

In the following discussion, I will explore these twin themes

of temporal transition and the commoditization of individual identity, not in the calendar posters themselves, but rather in a more modern genre of “new year’s pictures:” the block-buster films which have come to be considered conventional fare in Greater China during the lunar new year, or “Spring Festival,” holiday season. Known as “*hesui pian*” (which could also be translated as “new year’s pictures”), these films generally feature big-name stars, and adopt a deliberately light-hearted and parodic tone, and part of their popular appeal derives from the way in which they frequently trope on other films as well as on popular culture in general, while at the same time alluding ironically to their own status as cultural commodities. I will focus primarily on two prominent *hesui* pictures from this past year’s holiday season: Feng Xiaogang’s *Big Shot’s Funeral* [dawan] released in Mainland China in late December of 2001 and Jeffrey Lau’s (Liu Zhenwei) *Chinese Odyssey 2002* [tianxia wushuang]⁶ released in Hong Kong in February of 2002. Although radically different in theme and content, both works share a common concern with issues of individual identity, particularly in relation to the cultural logics of intertextual allusion and issues of the commodity form. I will focus specifically on how each film explores this relationship between uniqueness and repetition through a parallel exploration of



Donald Sutherland, Rosamund Kwan and Ge You in *Big Shot’s Funeral*

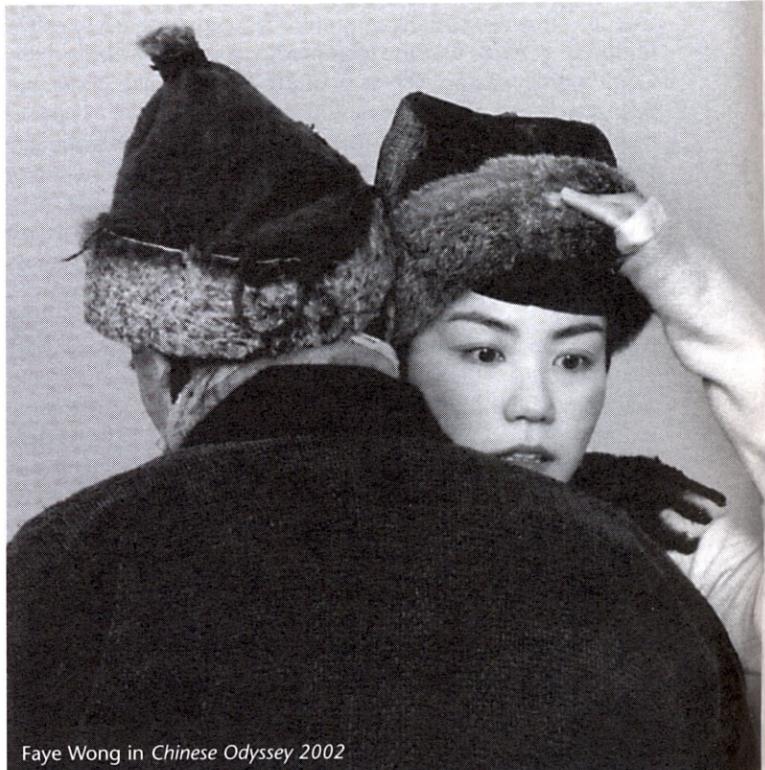
individual identity, on the one hand, and of cinema itself as a commodity form grounded on processes iterated citation, on the other.

The Emperor's Two Bodies

Big Shot's Funeral and *Chinese Odyssey 2002* were not only two of the biggest movies of the 2002 Spring Festival holiday season, but furthermore both of their directors are recognized as leading figures in this emerging genre of *hesui* films. The director of *Big Shot's Funeral*, Feng Xiaogang, for instance, is credited with having directed the first Mainland *hesui* picture, *The Dream Factory* [jiafang yifang] (released for the 1997-98 holiday season), and has subsequently gone on to release a new *hesui* picture nearly every year since then.⁷ Jeffrey Lau, meanwhile, released *Chinese Odyssey 2002* after a hiatus of three or four years, but had been producing *hesui* pictures in Hong Kong for almost a decade, including such classics as *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes* [shediao yingxiong zhuan zhi dongcheng xijiu] (1993) and the oddly tragic *Chinese Odyssey* dyptich: *Pandora's Box* and *Cinderella* [zhonghua xiyou: yueguang baohe and xianlü qiyuan] (released one after the other in the opening months of 1995). Although all of these *hesui* films rely on a combination of fast-paced action and tongue-in-cheek humor, each director nevertheless has his own distinctive take on the *hesui* genre. Feng Xiaogang's films, for instance, are all set in the present, while many of Lau's *hesui* pictures tend to be set either in the historical or fictional past.⁸

While *Chinese Odyssey 2002* and *Big Shot's Funeral* both conform to this general pattern—with Lau's *Odyssey* being set in the Ming dynasty and Feng's *Funeral* being set in the present—they nevertheless each struggle against the strictures of this reductive dichotomy. The main action of *Funeral*, for instance, takes place in contemporary Beijing, the film as a whole nevertheless takes as its starting-point the question of how to represent China's late-imperial past. *Odyssey*, meanwhile, is ostensibly set in the sixteenth century, but at the same time deliberately includes a host of humorous anachronisms which ironically gesture forward toward a more modern era.⁹ Mediating between these two chiasmic temporal trajectories in both of these films, meanwhile, is the figure of the Chinese emperor—with Lau's *Chinese Odyssey* featuring the Ming dynasty Zhengde emperor (reigned 1506-1521), and Feng's *Big Shot's Funeral* foregrounding the figure of the young Xuantong emperor, Pu Yi (reigned 1908-1912) who had the dubious distinction of being China's "last emperor." "Xuantong" and "Zhengde" are the emperors' reign names, and hence conventionally precede the word "emperor"; "Pu Yi," by contrast, is a personal name. In each work, this figure of the emperor provides a starting point for an exploration of issues of identity and repetition, with the emperor simultaneously constituting a quintessential example of the commodification of individual identity, on the one hand, but also representing the possibility of using that same logic of commodification against itself in order to create a space for genuine autonomy and creativity, on the other.

As a unique individual, each Chinese emperor is rooted in a specific historical moment; and, indeed, it has long been conventional to use emperors' reign names to denote the historical periods in which they were in power. At the same time, however, the emperorship can also be viewed as an ostensibly timeless institution, with each individual emperor simply



Faye Wong in *Chinese Odyssey 2002*

replacing the emperor who had preceded him. In this respect, Chinese emperors resemble kings and other hereditary rulers in that they function as a curious hybrid of being simultaneously a unique individual, on the one hand, and a symbolic figure-head, on the other. In medieval European legal theory, this paradox was known as the principle of the "king's two bodies," whereby the corporal presence of the king as a mortal individual was perceived as being legally distinct from his abstract and symbolic institutional status of "kingship," which was ostensible eternal and above secular authority. The ruler's power, under this model, is contingent precisely on his ability to sublate his own embodied presence, in favor of the awesome abstract power of the imperial position by which he is shadowed. Although the historians Kantorowicz and Giesey, in their respective discussions of this notion, both stress the cultural and historical specificity of their material,¹⁰ we may nevertheless observe certain suggestive parallels with the way in which imperial authority was constructed and imagined in imperial China. That is to say, the Chinese institution of imperial authority was itself traditionally grounded on the systematic effacement of the bodily corpus of the emperor himself, in order to effectively sublimate the institutional authority for which he was, at most, a potent synecdoche.

Seen from this perspective, the Zhengde and Xuantong emperors represent two suggestive extremes with respect to the potential conflicts which might arise between these two imperial "bodies." On the one hand, the notoriously hedonistic Zhengde emperor was evidently unhappy with the strictures of his imperial office, and at one point, for instance, decided it would be more interesting to serve as a general and lead his own army into battle. On the other hand, the young Xuantong emperor (Pu Yi) found himself in the curious position of being closely linked to an imperial office which, for all practical purposes, had already ceased to exist. As is well known, Pu Yi was

forced to abdicate the throne in early 1912, at the tender age of 6, after which he was allowed to continue living in the imperial palace under the nominal position of "emperor," but on the condition that his power and privileges not extend beyond the narrow confines of the "Forbidden City"¹¹ itself. While Pu Yi shared some of the Zhengde emperor's rebelliousness, the institution against which he was rebelling had, ironically, already been reduced to a mere spectral semblance of its former identity. As a result, Pu Yi proceeded to spend the next several decades simultaneously seeking to escape the institutional constraints of his (ex-)emperorship, on the one hand, while at the same time struggling to find a way to revive the institution of the (actual) emperorship, on the other.

Chinese Odyssey 2002 explicitly foregrounds the frustrations of the Zhengde emperor (played by the Taiwanese actor Chang Chen [Zhang Zhen]) with what he perceives to be the restrictions of his office, and details his and his sister's (Faye Wong [Wang Fei]) plan to sneak out of the palace and meet up in a town called Meilong ["plum dragon"].¹² It is the Princess Wushuang [her name literally means "no doubles"] who manages to escape first, and in Meilong she makes the acquaintance of a local ruffian known as "Bully the Kid" [xiao bawang]/Tony Leung Chiu-Wai [Liang Zhaowei] and his sister, Phoenix/Vicky Zhao [Zhao Wei]. The princess and Bully the Kid are immediately attracted to each other, though the situation is complicated by the fact that the princess at this point is disguised as a man (to allow her to travel more freely outside the palace), while Phoenix also tends to go around in drag (on account of the discrimination which she receives from villagers familiar with her brother's transgressions). The result is a multiply-transvestite love triangle, wherein the androgynous Phoenix falls in love with the cross-dressed princess, who in turn falls in love with the Phoenix's brother, Bully the Kid. Bully the Kid, meanwhile, develops a deep "homosocial" (in his eyes, at any rate) bond with the princess (whom he perceives as a man). Later, as Princess Wushuang is preparing to return to the palace, she and Bully the Kid find themselves unable to tear themselves away from each other, and ultimately have a long farewell scene underneath a flowering peach tree, in which Bully the Kid declares that he would surely want to marry Princess Wushuang, if only she were a woman.

While the arrival of the emperor helps to clarify matters somewhat (in that he promptly falls in love with Phoenix, while at the same time allowing Bully the Kid to realize the princess' true gender), it nevertheless creates a host of new problems as well. The two couples eventually both end up back at the palace, and while the emperor's mother approves of his marriage to Phoenix, she nevertheless initially forbids Princess Wushuang from marrying Bully the Kid. Even when the empress ultimately allows fate to dictate whether the latter couple should be allowed to marry, the magical "ring of Destiny" nevertheless refuses to remain on Bully the Kid's finger, thus signaling that he and the princess are not fated to be together. Bully the Kid therefore returns to Meilong, disconsolate, while the princess, back in the palace, goes insane from her broken heart. At the end of the film, the princess and Bully the Kid manage to find true love under the same flowering peach tree where they had initially declared their love to each other (when Bully the Kid still thought that the princess was a man)—although this time around the princess (who is still insane) is now convinced that *she* is Bully the Kid, and Bully

the Kid reciprocates by adopting *her* former identity.¹³ In this way, the Princess Wushuang ["no doubles"] finally finds her true "double" (Bully the Kid) but only through a process of explicitly doubling her own gendered identity.¹⁴ It is, furthermore, only through an explicit process of "doubling" her own self-identity, that she is finally able achieve the affirmation and self-recognition which she has arguably been seeking throughout the film as a whole.

In *Big Shot's Funeral*, by contrast, the figure of Pu Yi is not so much a protagonist in his own right, but rather he provides a symbolic fulcrum around which the rest of the movie revolves. In fact, *Big Shot's Funeral* is not so much about the boy emperor himself, but rather takes as its starting point the socio-cultural phenomenon of Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 epic *The Last Emperor*, which not only played a crucial role in introducing the figure of Pu Yi to Western audiences, but furthermore also helped to inspire a brief period of "last emperor fever" back in China and Hong Kong.¹⁵ Feng's film, meanwhile, opens with a scene depicting the (fictional) American director Don Tyler/Donald Sutherland in the Forbidden City, in the process of trying to film a *remake* of the original *The Last Emperor*. Tyler becomes convinced that he is unable to contribute anything new to Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, and soon decides to abandon the project altogether. His producers, as it turns out, are perfectly happy to have him step down, but say that the filming continue under the direction of some hot new director from MTV, and stipulate that the final picture remain under Tyler's name. Tyler responds that he has no problem with the MTV jock taking over the film, but is adamantly opposed to having his name associated with the final product. At this precise moment, Tyler suffers what appears to be a stroke, and falls into a coma. Just before he loses consciousness, however, he requests that his cinematographer Yo-yo/Ge You¹⁶—who up to this point has been filming Tyler's behind-the-scenes work on the *Last Emperor*-remake in order to provide footage for a potential future documentary—arrange a "comedy funeral" for him after he dies. Yo-yo, for his part, approaches this assignment with a singular passion, and after Tyler's colleagues refuse to fund the event, Yo-yo decides to raise capital for the funeral through an extensive campaign of advertisement and product placement.

It turns out, however, Tyler's medical condition was not as dire as everyone had thought, and he not only emerges from his coma, but even makes a full recovery. When he discovers the transnational media extravaganza which Yo-yo has made of the funeral arrangements, Tyler finds himself morbidly fascinated by the whole spectacle, and therefore decides to keep his recovery a secret so as to observe what Yo-yo will do next. In the end, it is precisely through this ironic convergence of death and hyper-commodification that Tyler apparently is able to rediscover his artistic creativity and sense of self, the initial loss of which had arguably contributed to his breakdown in the first place. By the end of the film, he appears to reassert his directorial control, as he effectively subsumes Yo-yo's increasingly far-fetched cinematic ventures under his own creative voice.

In both Lau's and Feng's films, the figure of the emperor is presented as torn between his official persona as the imperial sovereign, on the one hand, and his independent identity as an embodied individual, on the other. That is to say, both works are implicitly premised on a recognition that the position of the emperor is, in a sense, merely a dramatic construc-

tion, to be acted out by an individual who may or may not be willing to play the part. Not only is the emperorship presented as being a performative construct, but furthermore the individual emperor himself is seen as engaged in a struggle between his current embodiment and the weight of tradition. Viewed more abstractly, the figure of the emperor itself can be seen as a symbol of performativity, and even cinematicity. Along these lines, I argue that Lau's and Feng's films both use an attention to the figure of the Chinese emperor as a starting point for reflecting on more general issues of impersonation, parody, and cinematic intertextuality. The emperor, under this reading, functions as the ultimate commodity, while his struggles to come to terms with his identity constitute an attempt to unveil the role of social relations and textual repetition in the construction of both individual identity and cultural works.

Cinematic Encounters

As cultural commodities, block-buster releases like the *hesui* films themselves can be seen as wrestling with a similar predicament as this abstract figure of the emperor. The films are mass commodities, and frequently strive for uniqueness *not* by denying their own repetitive and citational relationship with previous commodities, but rather precisely by making that act of citation into a parodic object of reflection in its own right. That is to say, in China, as in the US, holiday season block-busters have a strong incentive to rely on tried and true formulas. As a result, it is increasingly common for these films to seek to mimic established models, relying heavily on remakes and sequels of previously successful films. Feng's and Lau's two most recent films are no exception to this practice, but at the same time they also introduce an interesting meta-textual twist, whereby they make their own films into commentaries on the very phenomenon of cinematic repetition. Feng's film is itself *about* a documentary of a failed remake of a Hollywood classic; while Lau's film can similarly be seen as a multiply recursive remake of a previous remake of another parody *avant-la-lettre* of yet another film. In both cases, the directors use this meta-referential structure in order to elaborate a more abstract commentary on processes of repetition and allusion itself, and particularly their implications for the relationship between individual identity and the forces of commodification.

In the case of Feng's *Funeral*, these themes of cinematic intertextuality and metatextuality are quite self-evident, as the entire film is explicitly about a failed remake of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. To be more precise, Feng's film is about the film (or, perhaps *is* the film) which ultimately develops out of the failed funeral extravaganza, which, in turn, itself evolved out of a documentary of the original failed remake of the Hollywood classic. Central to this entire process is the figure of the fictional director Don Tyler's personal cinematographer, Yo-yo, who not only has been charged with filming a behind-the-scenes view of the production of the Bertolucci remake, but furthermore is later put in charge of coordinating (and, implicitly, filming) Tyler's funeral, when it is believed that Tyler's death is imminent. It is this latter documentary process, moreover, which ultimately threatens to usurp the primacy of the outer film itself (understood here to mean Tyler's and/or Feng's own film). *Big Shot's Funeral* then concludes with several dizzying meta-representational turns, with the original director, Don Tyler, ultimately reemerging as the actual direc-

tor of yet another film-within-a-film. *Funeral* is notable both for Tyler's heartfelt frustrations with his perceived inability to contribute anything new to the project,¹⁷ as well as for the way in which the work ironically applies the post-modern conceit of the "death of the author" to cinema itself.¹⁸ That is to say, it is only through Tyler's apparent death that a creative space is opened up, one which allows him to retrieve the creative inspiration (and directorial control) which he had previously felt that he had lost.

In Lau's film, meanwhile, the theme of cinematic adaptation is built into the very structure and history of the work itself. More specifically, Lau is known for his long-term collaboration with the critically-acclaimed Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai (Wang Jiawei). While Wong is widely recognized as one of Hong Kong's leading directorial *auteurs*, Lau, by contrast, tends to be associated more with somewhat formulaic comedies and cinematic parodies (particularly parodies of Wong's own films). Wong and Lau had originally worked together on the screenplay of *Savior of the Soul* (Jiuyi shendiao xialü) in 1991, but it was apparently during Wong's filming of *Days of Being Wild* (Ah Fei zheng zhuan) (1991) shortly after, that (as Lau has claimed in a later interview) he grew disillusioned upon realizing that Wong had essentially lost control over his own film. As a result of this realization, Lau stopped collaborating with Wong in a conventional sense, and instead went on to direct a series of parodic riffs on Wong's own films.¹⁹ Lau's *Days of Tomorrow* (tiancheng dejiu) (1993), for instance, is an explicit parody of Wong's *Days of Being Wild* as well as his *As Tears Go By* (wangjia kamen) (1988).

The best example of this sort of parodic remake, however, is perhaps Lau's *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*, for which Wong Kar-wai himself served as executive producer during a break from directing his own *Ashes of Time* (dongxie xidu).²⁰ Based on the same Jin Yong martial arts novel as *Ashes of Time*, and using basically the same cast of Hong Kong stars, Lau's *Eagle-Shooting Heroes* is a light-hearted take-off on the ponderously philosophical *Ashes*. What makes this parody even more intriguing and unique, however, is that *Heroes* was released at the beginning of 1993 (just in time for the Chinese New Year holiday season), nearly a full year *before* the Wong Kar-wai film which it was ostensibly parodying. Two years later, Lau returned to a similar set of issues in his *Chinese Odyssey* dyptich, which is not only set in the same Xi'an desert as *Ashes*, but furthermore also uses many of the same actors and even actual snippets of dialogue from the earlier film. More generally speaking, *Chinese Odyssey* can be seen, in the words of film critic Thomas Shin, as a more "thoughtful response to Wong's film [*Ashes of Time*]," by which Lau succeeds in "fashion[ing] a new cinema of referentiality that redeems us from Wong's self-imprisoning and self-inflicted intellectual angst."²¹ The irony of this conclusion is that, while Wong is struggling to create his own distinctive cinematic voice and vision, Lau is essentially accomplishing the same thing precisely through a "derivative" reworking of Wong's own cinematic vocabulary.

The more recent *Chinese Odyssey 2002*, meanwhile, tropes quite directly on Lau's own 1995 *Chinese Odyssey* films, as can be seen not only from the similarity of their respective English titles (though their Chinese titles are, in fact, unrelated), but also from their mutual concern with the limits of individual identity. Just as the Zhengde emperor, in the 2002 film, struggles to achieve independence from his institutional identity as

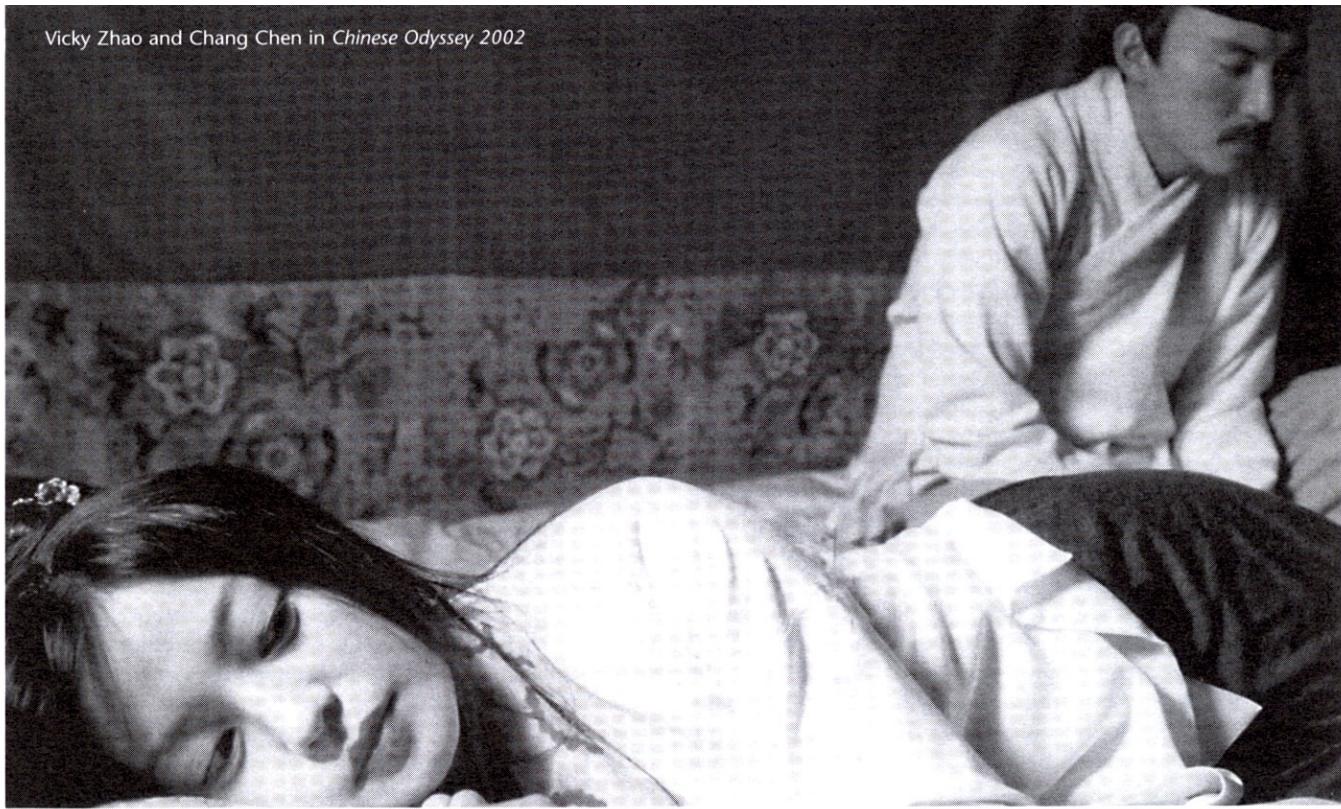
the emperor, similarly a central theme in the 1995 project involves the protagonist's (played by Stephen Chow [Zhou Xingchi]) gradual process of coming to terms with the reality of his own identity (initially appearing as the petty bandit leader "Joker," this character gradually realizes that he is actually a reincarnation of "Monkey," the rebellious protagonist of the classic Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West*). In both cases, the protagonist is torn between his own rebellious or hedonistic impulses, on the one hand, and the antithetical social identity which he is destined to inhabit, on the other. The most explicit acknowledgement of this linkage between the two films can be found in an early scene in *Chinese Odyssey 2002* which actually alludes explicitly to Lau's earlier 1995 work. Here, shortly after Princess Wushuang has arrived in Meilong village, the mysteriously ubiquitous Amour Amour/Athena Chu remarks sarcastically, "So moving. Good brother reminds me of a line by the Monkey King from *The Chinese Odyssey*:" 'Once, there was a bowl of hot roast pig's knuckles noodles in front of me ...' The princess then reinforces this allusion by pantomiming one of Monkey's trademark facial expressions from the earlier film. This allusion not only plays on the general thematic parallels between the two films, but more specifically Princess Wushuang's mimicry of *Chinese Odyssey*'s masculine Monkey functions as a reminder of her own current trans-gendered status. Just as the figure of "Joker," in the 1995 *Chinese Odyssey*, begins by cynically impersonating the legendary figure of Monkey (even though he is initially quite convinced that there is actually no relationship between himself and Monkey), before ultimately realizing that he actually *is* Monkey; similarly Princess Wushuang begins by impersonating a young man (when she conceals her identity outside the palace by going in drag), while at the end of the film she essentially makes that alternative identity a reality (by

directly assuming the identity of her male lover, Bully the Kid).

Princess Wushuang's initial direct allusion to *Chinese Odyssey* is then followed by another, somewhat more complex, intertextual reference to Lau's 1995 project. This latter allusion actually has its roots in a key scene from yet another work: Wong Kar-wai's classic 1994 film *Chungking Express*. Like *Chinese Odyssey 2002*, *Chungking Express* also features a double love story between two pairs of protagonists, with the film's two autonomous subplots being stitched together by a pivotal scene in which one of the protagonists from the first half of the film, the heart-broken Cop 223/Takeshi Kaneshiro [Cheng Jinwu], accidentally brushes past the fast-food restaurant employee Fay/Faye Wong [Wang Fei], who will emerge as one of the key protagonists of the second half of the film. At that precise moment, the film abruptly freezes, while Cop 223's voice-over prophetically remarks, "At the high point of our intimacy, we are just 0.01 cm away from each other. I knew nothing about her. Six hours later, she fell in love with another man." An almost identically-worded scene then appears in Lau's own *A Chinese Odyssey, Part II: Cinderella* from the following year. Just as the love-stricken female immortal Lin Zixia/Athena Chu [Zhu Yin] is about to cut the throat of the protagonist, Joker/Monkey (whom she believes she is fated to love, but who up to this point has spurned her), when the frame suddenly freezes and Joker's voice-over remarks that, "At that moment, the blade was only 0.01 cm from my throat, but after a quarter of a second, the female owner of the sword would fall in love with me, because I decided to tell a lie. I've told many lies in my life, but I think that this is the most wonderful one." Finally, Lau returns to this same line yet again in his *Chinese Odyssey 2002*, in a scene following almost immediately after Phoenix's explicit allusion (cited above) to Lau's own 1995 *Chinese Odyssey*. In this latter scene, just as Bully the

Faye Wong and Tony Leung Chiu-wai in *Chinese Odyssey 2002*





Kid glimpses the transvestite princess for the first time, the frame suddenly freezes with Bully the Kid, his sister Phoenix, and Princess Wushuang all watching each other. Bully the Kid's voice-over then observes, with an odd precision, that, "At a distance of 7.08 meters, within the time of 0.25 incense stick, I made a decision. The gentlemen was athletic, and looked handsome. I decided to introduce him to my sister...." Each of the other characters in the scene then goes on to voice a similar variation of this same line, in each case substituting the metric precision of the preceding two scenes with a parodically arbitrary cluster of spatial and temporal referents, while at the same time substituting the earnest sincerity of the previous two scenes with a more cavalier sense of random encounter.

While each of these preceding three passages is most literally concerned with the dynamics of serendipitous encounters between random individuals, the resulting layering of references suggests that each iterative citation may also be read more abstractly as a commentary on the nature of intertextual "encounters" between different films or other cultural products. Seen in this way, Lau here is using a palimpsest of references to other films (including his own) in order to reflect on how any cultural product is necessarily in dialogue with a wide variety of other previous and contemporary works. Rather than being concerned with romance and love (the ostensible subject of the scenes in question), however, these moments of allusive "encounter" are instead concerned with the relationship between derivative reduplication, on the one hand, and the potential for genuine cinematic innovation, on the other. Just as Princess Wushuang's final apotheosis lies in the figurative doubling of her own identity (whereby she assumes an alternative identity as a man), similarly the ultimate "originality" of Lau's *Chinese Odyssey 2002* itself—the Chinese name of which (tianxia wushuang) could be translated literally as "no doubles under heaven"—arguably lies precisely in its candid realization that it is nothing more than an elaborate "doubling" of previous cinematic and cultural works. Artistic creativity and individual identity, therefore, lies not so much in a

resistance to this reality of iterative repetition (or doubling), but rather in mobilizing it for one's own purposes.

Planned Obsolescence

Big Shot's Funeral is neatly framed by two shots of the boy actor playing the part of Pu Yi in Don Tyler's attempted remake of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. Appearing profoundly bored between sets, the boy sits on his miniature throne and drinks from a plastic bottle of Coca-cola. This seemingly heterodox image of the Chinese emperor enjoying a quintessential American soft-drink effectively brings together two of the central themes I have been examining here: namely, those of commodity fetishism and contestations of identity. The Coke which the emperor-actor is drinking derives its economic and cultural value from its ability to be identically reproduced *ad infinitum* (both as an actual commodity, as well as a marketing image). Conversely Tyler's frustrations with his film derive precisely from his feeling that he is trapped within an empty cycle of cinematic repetition, unable to contribute anything new to the models with which he is working. A cynical reading of this framing scene of "Pu Yi" drinking the Coke might see it as a clumsy attempt at product placement, but such a reading would miss the point that the *entire film* is actually an extended parody of the cultural economics on which such a practice of product placement is itself premised. Just as the director Don Tyler's (anticipated) corpse becomes an elaborate arcade on which a dizzying array of products are seductively displayed, similarly the act of product placement in the film becomes, in turn, a suggestive platform for a complex critique of the commodity form itself.

In an influential discussion of the symbolic implications of death in Western society, Jean Baudrillard has suggested that death can be seen as a sort of "universal equival[ent]," providing the imaginary ground upon which "[v]alue, in particular time as value, is accumulated in the phantasm of death deferred, pending the term of a linear infinity of value." Along similar lines, he also suggests that the "figure of the double,"

of the “[s]hadow, spectre, reflection, image” are all important symbolic byproducts of this horizon of death as it casts its shadow over the living.²² We might further extrapolate these conclusions by suggesting that a symbolic “death” has a similar relevance to the commodity form itself, in that the “value” of any particular commodity is predicated in part on the necessary possibility of its own future non-existence and replacement. This strategic linkage of commodity fetishism and death, in turn, leads us back to the calendar posters with which I opened the present essay. As I have suggested, the visual form of these calendar posters represents a hybrid of temporally specific dimensions, on the one hand, and more “ahistorical” elements which implicitly resist being linked to any specific historical moment, on the other. This paradox, in turn, is given an additional twist in the current nostalgic fascination with these early-twentieth century posters—wherein careful replicas of these historically-specific artifacts are marketed as commodities which effectively use these historical images as a foil against which a contemporary post/modernist identity may be implicitly reinforced. As in the case of Lau’s and Feng’s films, a new “identity” is created through the partial “failure” of an attempted act of historical repetition. Just as death is not the strict antithesis of life, but rather functions as the symbolic ground against which life derives its value and meaning in the first place; similarly repetition (the “figure of the double,” in Baudrillard’s words) is not antithetical in individual identity (of embodied individuals, cultural artifacts, etc.), but rather constitutes the ground upon which a form of identity itself becomes possible. The significance of the framing scene of Pu Yi drinking the Coke, therefore, lies not only in the juxtaposition of imperial Chinese and modern American symbols, but also in the way in which the identities of both the Coke (as a commodity) and Pu Yi (as the emperor) are grounded on an intricate negotiation of individuality and repetition, as indeed are *Big Shot’s Funeral* and *Chinese Odyssey 2002* themselves.

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1 The first recorded reference to the term “calendar poster” was by a Shanghai Bank in 1896, but one of the earliest large-scale practitioners of the genre was the American Tobacco Company. See Chen Shi, “Wo kan lao yueten pai” [My reflections on old calendar posters]; and Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 76-77.

2 For further discussion of this tradition of representing abstract “beauties” (meiren) in Chinese art, see Wu Hong’s discussion in *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 209.

3 While it is true that the inclusion of the actual calendar ultimately became optional, the fact that the posters continue (to this day) to be referred to as “calendar posters” suggests the degree to which this sense of temporal transition was intrinsic to the genre of the posters itself (regardless of whether a calendar appeared on the actual poster or not).

4 Although it was not uncommon for calendar posters to feature traditional scenes instead of individual women, the “beautiful woman” format nevertheless continued to be identified as the most typical version of the genre. Furthermore, even the posters which featured images of “modern girls” dressed in the latest fashions, did so in a way that ironically echoed the more de-historicized perspective of the earlier “beautiful woman” model.

5 In this respect, it is particularly appropriate that the commodity most typically associated with these calendar posters was the cigarette. As Richard Klein has observed in another context, “the inevitable, ceaseless return of something indistinguishable from what precedes it and follows it is like the circle or cycle of time’s passage, each ‘now,’ as we have seen, exactly identical to the now it

replaces and anticipates. A history of smoking is, therefore, like a brief history of time—of the condition of history itself.” (Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are Sublime*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 82).

6 Here, and throughout this essay, I will first provide the Cantonese/English spelling of the Hong Kong-based actors and directors, followed by a Mandarin romanization in brackets. Similarly, in the case of Hong Kong films, I will first cite the English title (which is frequently selected by the directors’ producers themselves, and often bears little or no relation to the Chinese title), followed by a Mandarin romanization of the Chinese title.

7 These other films are: *Be There or Be Square* [bujian busan] (1998-99); *Sorry Baby* [meiwan meiliao] (1999-2000); and, most recently, *Big Shot’s Funeral*.

8 Although many of Lau’s best-known *hesui* picture are, indeed, set in the past, he has also directed a number of comedies set in present-day Hong Kong as well.

9 For instance, there is a hilarious scene near the beginning of the film in which a man on horseback is stopped by the imperial “police” and charged with “speeding”—with the evidence being a “snapshot” (actually a sketch produced by an artist hidden within a box) which ostensibly reveals the speed based on his facial expression. More generally, a recurrent theme in many of Lau’s films is that of time travel and uncanny return, as seen, for instance, in his original *Chinese Odyssey* films (in which Joker is accidentally transported back 500 years in time) as well as in his more recent film, *Second Time Around* [wuxian fuhuo] (2002) in which a Las Vegas gambler accidentally causes his friend’s death, and then is transported backward in time with the potential to change his fate.

10 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; and R.E. Giese, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France*, Geneva: Librairie E. Droz., 1960. More recently, Tanaka Fujitani has suggested that Meiji period Japanese intellectuals borrowed from this European model in their reformulation of Japanese emperorship. See Tanaka Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 155.

11 “The Forbidden City” is the name typically given to the imperial palace complex in the center of Beijing.

12 This story itself has a long history in Chinese folklore under the name “The Wandering Dragon Seduces the Phoenix” (youlong xifeng), and in 1959 the Hong Kong-based director Lee Han-hsiang (Li Hanxiang) adapted it into a film entitled *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (jiangshan meiren). More recently, similar material was used in a *yueju* opera entitled “The Township of Meilong” written by Luo Huazhen and directed by Zhang Manjun, which opened in China in 2002.

13 The fact that this key moment of gender inversion is associated with the “Plum Dragon” [Meilong] village is ironically appropriate, in that the plum blossom itself has a peculiarly transgendered significance in Chinese culture. As art historian Maggie Bickford points out, during the Song and early Yuan dynasties, the plum blossom was regarded as primarily a symbol of female beauty, but by the late Yuan and early Ming it had come to function more as a symbol of male literati. See Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

14 In the film’s discussion of doubling and inversion, much is made of the fact that the couple’s reflection can be distinctly made out in the pool of water at the foot of the peach tree.

15 For a discussion of this phenomenon of “last emperor fever,” see Carlos Rojas, “Imperial Vestiges and the Site/Sight of Castration” (unpublished essay).

16 Ge You is one of Mainland China’s leading actors, and starred in each of Feng’s four *hesui* pictures to-date.

17 He has a wonderful monologue near the beginning of the film, in which he complains to his producer that, “I could shoot this script, and I could bring it in on budget, but you’d just end up with a pile of celluloid junk. Uninspired trash that doesn’t have any truth in it, Tony. None. I’ve been waiting for my god of truth to show me his face, but all I get is the back of his head. He’s walking away from me, he’s left me in the dark. I’m sitting in this black hole, in this depression, and I can’t get out... I’ve been looking at this thing from every point of view: from the Eastern point of view, from the Western point of view, from the child’s, from the artist’s, and all I get is a description of the emperor. You know what I mean? I mean a superficial representation of the human condition, that doesn’t transcend banal reality. It doesn’t have god’s light in it. You know what I mean? There’s no epiphany, there’s nothing poetically definitive about it. And I’ve just realized that none of our films have had that....”

18 See Barthes’ classic essay, “Death of the Author,” in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, New York: Hill and Wang 142-148. Compare, also, Michel Foucault’s more extended reflections on a similar set of issues, in “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 113-138.

19 Although this represented the end of their explicit collaborative projects, Wong and Lau have nevertheless continued to maintain a close professional relationship. Wong, for instance, is the executive producer of Lau’s *Eagle-Shooting Heroes*, *Chinese Odyssey* parts 1 and 2, and *Chinese Odyssey 2002*. Lau, meanwhile, was the executive producer of Wong’s *Fallen Angels*.

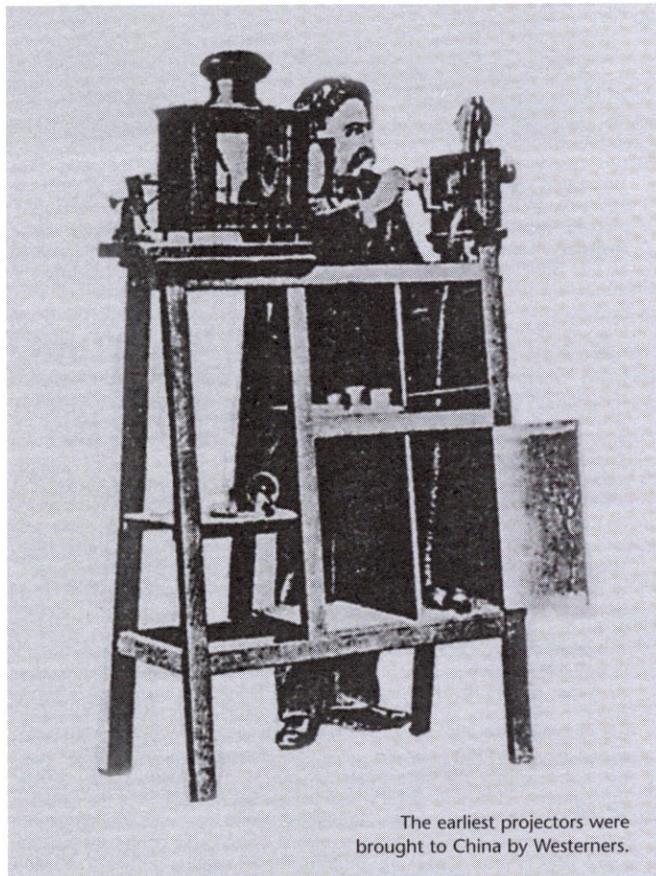
20 Wong and Lau were originally planning on having the *Eagle-Shooting Heroes* project be a similarly collaborative venture, with Wong directing the first film (*ashes of Time*), and Lau taking responsibility for the sequel.

21 For further discussion of some of these issues, see Thomas Shin, “Jeff Lau: Laughing His Way to Life,” in *Hong Kong Panorama: 2001-2002*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council, 2002, pp. 74-77.

22 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, London: Sage Publications, 1993, pp. 146, 140.

Hollywood and the Chinese Other

by Tan Ye



The earliest projectors were brought to China by Westerners.

In the post-colonial era, Hollywood films have often been treated by scholars on both sides of the Pacific as a form of cultural invasion; and the Chinese "Other," the reluctant victim of this invasion. My discursive review of the interaction between Hollywood and China is intended not to negate the invasion-and-resistance theory in general but to refute the generalization of the "Otherness" in the Chinese context. In China, there has never been a uniform opinion of Hollywood, because there has never been a single, faceless entity of the Chinese Other. In China, authorities' opinions, art elites' opinions, filmmakers' opinions, cineastes' opinions, and masses' opinions have always differed, sometimes polarized, from one another. Two perspectives, to treat Hollywood as a political entity and to treat it as a provider of entertainment, have been the major demarcation of the differences. In this essay, the term, "Hollywood" is used to distinguish commercial ventures from auteur films, independent films, or underground films made in the United States, and "audience" is referred to the average cinema-goers who view films, not just Hollywood films, as sheer means of entertainment.

Historically, the relationship between Hollywood and China can be divided into five phases. The first phase (1895-1927) covers the Classical Hollywood period, particularly the silent era. The second phase (1927-1949) starts with Hollywood's Golden Years and ends shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The third phase (1949-1979) embraces the thirty years of Maoist control, when Hollywood was banned in China. The fourth phase (1979-1989) begins with the reintroduction of Hollywood to China and ends with the Tiananmen Square Incident. The last phase (1989-present) is the Post Deng Era, from Tiananmen to the present.

I. THE INSPIRATION

Introducing American Films to China: 1895-1927

China was among the few countries exposed to cinematic culture at a very early stage. A year after he invented cinematography in France, Louis Lumière sent his cameraman to Shanghai to show some shots (it was not yet a film in the modern sense) of magic and acrobatic performances. The historical date was August 11, 1896. Another year had barely passed, when James Ricketson, an American from Maplewood, NJ,

arrived in China to exhibit some episodes shot in America. In those early episodes, the principle of Hollywood had already emerged: to entertain with novelty and sensuality. In 1897, the first film review in Chinese history was published in Shanghai. It refers to Rication's show as an "American electrical light shadow play" and the word "shadow" is typically Daoist:

American electrical light shadow play ... magical and illusionary, all beyond imagination. ... Two fluffy-haired blondes dance in a charmingly naive manner ... Two Westerners wrestle. ... Two Russian princesses dance to music ... A woman bathing ... Bothered by a bedbug, a guy tries to catch it ... A magician covers a female with a blanket. When he lifts the blanket, she has disappeared. ... All these tricks cannot be comprehended. ... The strangest scene is a bicycle race ... I then heave a deep sigh: thousands of changes between heaven and earth ... are similar to what we see in the shadow play. ... Life is nothing but shadow of bubbles.¹

"Dianying (electrical shadow)," the Chinese term for "film," is perhaps derived from the above review. The first Chinese to enter this growing "electrical shadow" business was Lin Chu-shan, who in 1903 brought back from America a projector and rented a teahouse in Beijing's theater district to show some episodes shot in the U.S. So, the first film shown by a Chinese to a Chinese audience was American. At that time, this film was not accessible in most parts of the US, which in 1905 had only ten cinemas nationwide. Contrary to what many people would assume, the court of the Qing dynasty was not against this dazzling innovation from the West. In 1904, a British official presented a film at the Empress Dowager's palace in Beijing. It was a disaster, which resulted not from the content of the film but from an electrical fire caused by a primitive generator. Even so, Her Majesty only banned the film inside her palace, not outside.

The period of Classical Hollywood silent film is usually dated between 1906 and 1927. The Chinese film industry came into being almost simultaneously. Between 1905 and 1908, Fengtai Photography Shop in Beijing made its first film, *Dingjun Mountain*. Shot with a French camera and film cassettes bought from a German photography supply store in Beijing, it was a Beijing Opera adopted from a popular Chinese novel, *The Three Kingdoms*. General Huang Zhong, the hero of the film, was played by Tan Xinpei, an eminent Beijing Opera performer patronized by the Empress Dowager. This film was a classic application of a doctrine prevalent in the last years of the Qing dynasty: "[to treat] Chinese learning as the foundation and Western learning as utilities." It was eight years prior to the establishment of Hollywood. At the turn of the century, American films did not have any superiority in China, where most foreign films were imported from France. At that time, English and German films were also quite popular. Although China's first encounter with the West was characterized with distrust and resistance, the advent of film was never resisted by the Chinese audience. Within one decade, cinemas were established in all major Chinese cities. In June 1911, the Qing court issued "Regulations of Film Plays" in Shanghai, forbidding "showing films without a license," "films containing obscenity," "male and female viewers sitting together," and "showing films after mid-night."² Considering the traditional moral con-



Dingjun Mountain, the first Chinese film.

cerns and stern control over art and literature in feudal China, these earliest restrictions on films were not exceptionally harsh and they were not specially targeted at American films.

Exactly a half century later, *The Chinese History of Film Development*, which was then the most authoritative, summarizes this period with the following words:

Due to the lengthy stagnation of Chinese feudalism, especially to its semi-colonial and semi-feudal condition caused by imperialist invasions, Chinese science and technology was extremely backward. Therefore, Chinese cinema started with films made not by Chinese but by foreigners. [The birth of] Chinese cinema was a result of imperial commercial export and cultural invasion. Although it was not yet an established art form, film was already opium of the decadence from imperialist "civilization." Nevertheless, the appearance of films in China did bring a new form of entertainment to Chinese people and was welcomed by the [Chinese] audience. It also aroused some intellectuals' desire to make Chinese films.³

Reading it today, we may feel that the above summary is politicized, but given the situation in the 1960s, when all Western



ABOVE *Broken Blossoms*, directed by D. W. Griffith in 1919.

BELOW Shanghai drama circle turned to film-making in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The photo, taken in 1936, shows three newly wed couples from the circle and their matchmakers. Jiang Qing, who later became the nation's first lady by marrying Mao Zedong, sits together with her first husband Tang Na (middle front). Three decades after the photo was taken, Jiang Qing assisted Mao in launching the Cultural Revolution and assumed almost unlimited power, with which she persecuted artists, especially film artists who knew her past, ruthlessly.

films were banned in China and Sino-Western cultural exchanges had been withheld for more than a decade, it took some courage for the authors to reveal the truth that the first Western films introduced to China were entertaining, and both common audience and intellectuals welcomed them. As a result, when the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, all the copies of *The Chinese History of Film Development* were burned and all three of its authors persecuted for "distorting history" and "rampantly attacking Mao Zedong's guidelines for art and literature."⁴

By 1909, there were already more than 10,000 cinemas in the United States. About ten years after the First World War, Hollywood became the superpower of the film world. Supported by a peaceful domestic environment and rapid economic growth, a group of talented individuals started to shape an effective system of film production in America and to win fame all over the world. Like the atmospheric "Oriental," theaters constructed in America in the 1920s, oriental images created by Hollywood were stereotyped but not always, as some film historians assert, negative. In spite of its obvious commercial purposes, which were devoid of any genuine interest in comprehending the "inscrutable," Hollywood never formed a unified perception for, or against, Chinese. The 16-part *The Yellow Menace* produced in 1916 is undoubtedly a shining example of a racist attitude against Asians. But *Broken Blossoms*, which has often been used to exemplify the distorted image of Chinese people, is not exactly the case. Directed by D. W. Griffith in 1919, it depicts a sensitive Chinese man who saves a white girl abused by her father. Consequently he



is murdered by her father, the villain in the tale. The Chinese man appears mystic and feminine but not at all evil. His admiration for the girl is spiritual and his caring for her, unselfish. As claimed in the prologue of the film, *Broken Blossoms* advocates such Confucian virtues as "gentleness and benevolence." These two films are better understood in their historical contexts. *The Yellow Menace* is a reenactment of the age-long nightmare caused by the Mongolian invasion of Europe; whereas *Broken Blossoms* serves as a contemporary reminder of the fragility of China in the face of Western invasions at the turn of the century. In this period, two other controversial films about the Chinese were produced, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). While the former creates a prototype of the wise and wicked detective who functions well in a dramatic situation but reveals little complexity in characterization; the latter presents a much more complicated warlord who is at the same time a pervert and a gallant.

During the silent film era, most Chinese filmmakers were from the drama circle in Shanghai, and their film training was minimal. Like their counterparts in Japan, Chinese filmmakers' education was a combination of old-fashioned apprenticeship in the studio and observation of Hollywood products. Thematically, Hollywood did not exert any significant influence on the Chinese film industry. Technologically, however, China learned a great deal from America. Practical skills such as analytical editing, soft focus, backlighting, masking (blocking off parts of the frame image to create different shapes within the frame) and so on were all borrowed from Hollywood.

During the first phase, Hollywood treated China as a source of exoticism to attract its domestic audience rather than a potential market in international competition. There is no record that any of those films were shown in China.

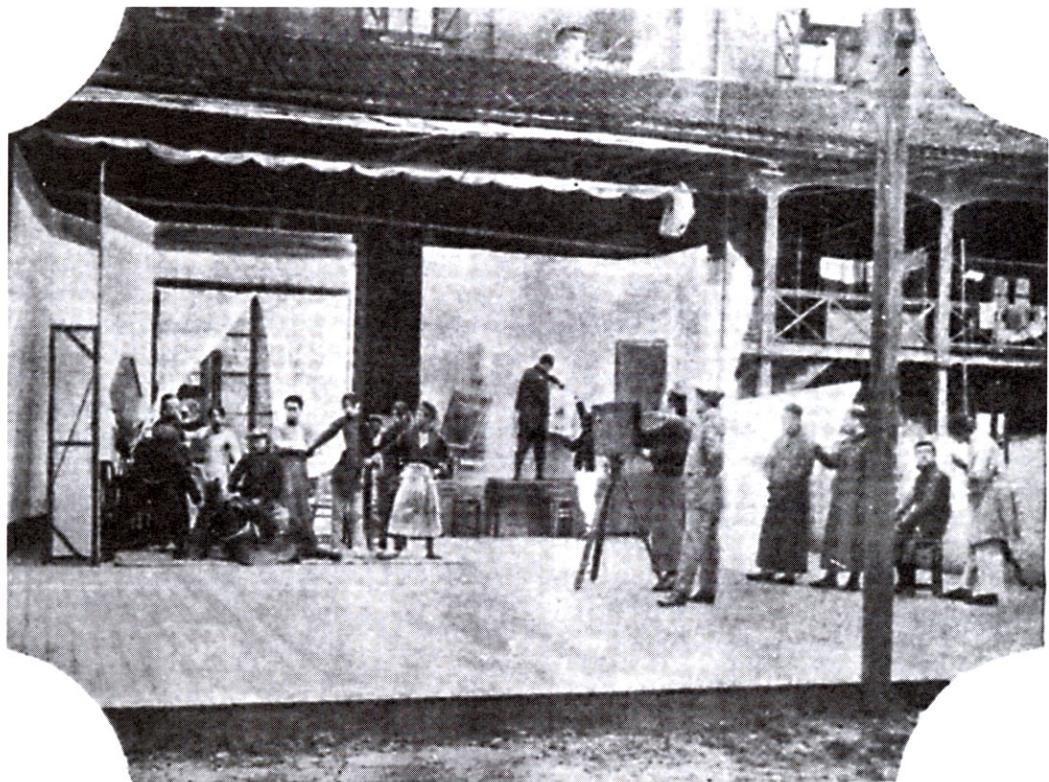
Once Hollywood was ready to conquer the world, the first country it turned to was China. For a time, American filmmakers seriously contemplated taking advantage of China's cheap labor and material as well as its exotic scenery. The first joint venture, American-Oriental Picture Company, was established in 1926. *Shattered Jade Fated to be Re-United*, the first Chinese film made with American money, was a melodrama derived from the Chinese classical theater—a promising beginning. Had the Second Civil War⁵ not broken out in China and thus made further investment impractical, making films in China could have become very profitable for Hollywood. Because of the war, Hollywood gave up the idea of producing films in China; instead it doubled its efforts to export films to this country, whose own film industry was seriously crippled by the war.

II. THE DOMINANCE

Hollywood's Golden Years in China: 1927-1949

The year 1927 was significant for Hollywood and China in different ways. For Hollywood, it was the beginning of its golden age. For China, it was the first serious clash between the Nationalists and Communists, a clash that was to split the country for the rest of the century. While the Chinese were

Asia Studio, the first film studio in Shanghai, was established in 1909 and funded by an American named Benjamin Brasky.





Street Angel (above) directed by Yuan Muzhi and *Crossroad* (below) by Shen Xiling bore some resemblance to American realistic acting and mise-en-scène but no evidence of intentional learning from Hollywood.



busy making war against each other, Hollywood was busy making films for the world, including China. Before long, Hollywood dominated the global market. The average percentage of Hollywood films on the international market was 75% and in China was between 85% and 90%. In 1936, for example, China imported 367 foreign films, of which 328 were made by Hollywood.

The transition from silent to sound film was completed. While old comedians like Chaplin could still cheer Chinese up, new tragediennes like Greta Garbo had already begun to soften Chinese hearts. Rather than hampering the advance of Hollywood, the Depression boosted it, driving millions to cinemas to temporarily forget their worries. During this phase Hollywood gained the name of "dream factory." Escapism—some modern purists may also call it "plebeianism"—served its purpose, both for Americans during the Depression and for Chinese in time of war. If, in the previous phase, China was Hollywood's source of exoticism, now, watching American Westerns, musicals, gangster films, screwball comedies and science fiction, it was the Chinese people who enjoyed exoticism from America. Learning more technique from Hollywood, the First Generation⁶ of Chinese filmmakers' format became standardized as Hollywood's. Usually a film would start with a panoramic view that was followed by a long shot, a medium shot, and finally a close-up. Straight angle, 3-point lighting (key, back, fill-in), and simple dialogue were the mainstream.

When the War of Resistance against Japan broke out in 1937, Hollywood produced one of its most pro-China films, *The Good Earth*. Directed by Sidney Franklin, the film faithfully rendered Pearl Buck's Nobel winning novel. Set in pre-revolutionary China, the film transformed the vicissitudes of an ordinary woman into a saga of all the Chinese peasantry. Wang Long, the hero played by Paul Muni, is a simple farmer who works hard to become a prosperous landlord. Tragedy follows along the way as he betrays his family and neglects the earth he has worshipped. The real "good earth" is embodied by his wife, a meek yet obdurate servant girl played by Luise Rainer. From a battered slave the girl grows into a proud, noble lady whose spirit represents the indomitable strength of the Chinese in the face of danger and misfortune. Rainer's convincing portrayal of the Chinese woman won her the title of the Best Actress of that year's Academy Awards.

Hollywood's golden years were also its most successful years in China. Never did Hollywood show more films in China: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Only Angels have Wings* (1939), and *Stagecoach* (1939)—to name just a few. By the end of this phase, more than 4,000 Hollywood films had been shown in China. The War of Resistance against Japan and the Chinese Civil War gave birth to the Second Generation of Chinese filmmakers. During and after the war, the Second Generation, like the rest of the nation, regarded America as a reliable friend and teacher. Knowledgeable not only of American films but also of Western literature, this generation were particularly fond of such influential Hollywood adaptations of literature as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939). After musicals by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin took China by storm, the Second Generation began to make their own musicals. Most of their attempts were mediocre, including the relatively successful *Ten Thousand Violets and One Thousand Red*

Blossoms (*Wanzi qianhong*), whose borrowing of Mickey Mouse, Bunny girls, candles and birthday cakes appeared awkward in the Chinese cultural context. The more successful films produced by the Second Generation were realistic ones that dealt with contemporary life and war in China. If films like *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi*) directed by Yuan Muzhi and *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou*) by Shen Xiling bore some resemblance to American realistic acting and *mise-en-scène* but no evidence of intentional learning from Hollywood, Xia Yan's comedy, *Money Tree*, clearly used Alfred Hitchcock's *Juno and the Paycock* (1930) as its model. Hollywood influence was also obvious in *Small Toy* (*Xiao wanyi*) and other films directed by Sun Yu, who had been trained in America.

Unlike their French or Italian counterparts, Chinese filmmakers made no effort to avoid thematic repetition of Hollywood. They did not have to. The situation in China simply did not allow Chinese filmmakers to make stories similar to Hollywood films. The example of *Ten Thousand Violets and One Thousand Red Blossoms* was not followed simply because it was not appreciated by the majority of the Chinese audience and therefore not economically profitable. Through trial and error, the Chinese filmmakers drew inspiration more consciously from their own cultural tradition. In spite of budgetary problems, Chinese films like *Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (*Huoshao honglianshi*, a glorification of martial art produced by Bright Star Studio in Shanghai) were successful enough to compete with Hollywood films.

For all their commercial concerns, the relationship between Hollywood and China has also been political in the sense that it has always been subordinate to the relationship between the two governments. As China's ally during the Second World War, America's general attitude toward the Chinese was the most sympathetic and Hollywood's general attitude was no exception. A conspicuous example is *The Battle of China* (1944), a documentary financed by the American Army and directed by Frank Capra, whose *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* is often cited as a sample of Hollywood's hostility toward the Chinese. *The Battle of China* exalts the pacifism of China to such an extent that it declares that although the Chinese invented gunpowder many centuries ago, they used it only as fireworks on festive occasions but never as weapons in wars.

III. THE ENEMY

Mao Era: 1949–1979

Before Communists banned Hollywood in China, there was a short period of tolerance, a fact vividly recorded in a letter by an American wife of an engineer in 1949, when both Chinese and American governments were unsure of how to deal with each other.

I expected that American books and magazines would probably be banned and that surely no more American movies would be shown ... Our pre-liberation fears have not materialized and there's no change in our way of living so far. ... American movies are still being shown; I saw Frank Sinatra and Jimmie Durante in *It Happened in Brooklyn* last week. Two rows of Pa Lu [Eighth Division] soldiers sat in front of us and enjoyed Jimmie Durante enormously.⁷

The period of tolerance ended in October 1950 when the Korean War broke out. Stern cultural control not only kept American films from the public but also persecuted Chinese filmmakers who favored Hollywood. The Third Generation of Chinese filmmakers, who had seen many Hollywood films in the 1940s, began to make films under the most severe censorship. After Mao Zedong launched the first nationwide criticism against *Secret History of the Qing Palace* (*Qinggong mishu*), which portrayed the Guanxu Emperor as a hero for reforming the Qing court through learning from the West, any appreciation of American films was considered a crime.⁸ The Third Generation had little choice but to make socialist films, in which the image of America was unwaveringly negative.

With the absence of diplomatic relation between the US and PRC, Chinese filmmakers and the general public had no access to Hollywood films made in the 1950s and 1960s. During the first half of this phase most of the foreign films in China were imported from the Soviet Union and many Chinese filmmakers were trained in the Soviet Union. After China and the Soviet Union parted company, the foreign films publicly shown were made either in North Korea or in Albania. However, even in this isolation, under the excuse of "internal criticism," film professionals, students of cinema studies and



Burning the Red Lotus Temple.

English, and government officials could still view some Hollywood films made in the 1930s and 1940s. Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, more and more Hollywood classics were "internally criticized." Among them were *Rebecca*, *Gone with the Wind*, *My Fair Lady*, *Singing in the Rain* and *The Sound of Music*.

IV. THE IDOLIZATION

Post Mao Era: 1979-1989

Officially, the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, but it took three more years for the Chinese film industry to revive. When the Fourth Generation began to make films, Hollywood came back to China. It was a time of confusion and hope. Old faith was vanishing rapidly; new faith was yet to be established. There was a huge void to be filled up and Hollywood was welcomed with exceptional enthusiasm. This time, the learning from Hollywood and from the West in general was systematic. Most of the important Western books on cinema and film criticism were introduced and discussed. The nationwide debate on the reformation of film language started in 1979 indicated serious efforts to break away from the socialist format of film-making and to look for new alternatives.

At that time the Fifth Generation of filmmakers were still first year students at Beijing Film Academy. According to Li Tuo, a theorist who started the 1979 debate, the Fifth Generation was the first generation that studied Hollywood thoroughly.⁹ They were allowed and encouraged to review all the Hollywood classics in the National Film Archive. It was in this period that contemporary Hollywood films became available to the general public in China through both legal and illegal channels.

American films were shut out of China at a time when Hollywood suffered repeatedly from domestic box office failures and reintroduced to China soon after Hollywood recovered from its lean years. So, many Chinese, unaware that

Hollywood had also come through a difficult period, regarded Hollywood as an unfailing film giant. New major films like *Patton*, *On Golden Pond*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Deer Hunter* were received with unqualified admiration. Numerous reviews and essays treated these films as typical examples of Hollywood and urged Chinese filmmakers to learn from them. So they did. Films like *Small Flower* (*Xiaohua*) and *Laughter of a Bothered Man* (*Kunaoren de xiao*) reveal apparent efforts to use Western film language either to enhance the narrative or to increase the complexity of characterization.

The halo of Hollywood began to diminish around the mid-1980s when the Fifth Generation began to claim their share at international film festivals. Several factors contributed to the decline of Hollywood superiority in China. First, by then Chinese filmmakers had seen enough Hollywood films, including some poorly made ones. Second, many talented directors from Japan, France, Italy, and other countries had been introduced to China. Third, after studying the history of Hollywood and that of Chinese cinema, Chinese filmmakers as well as film critics renewed the old faith that to make respectable Chinese films they needed to look into their own heritage. And finally, post-colonial theory and nationalism prompted Chinese filmmakers to challenge the superpower of Hollywood. The last factor becomes more noticeable in the next phase.

V. THE DIVERSIFICATION

Post Deng Era: 1989-Present

The June Fourth Massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989 marked the end of the Deng Xiaoping era. Cultural dictatorship worsened. For a while the film world worried that the triumphant development of Chinese cinema would be curbed and films from Hollywood would be banned in China for another half century. But once the genie of democracy is let out of the bottle, it will not be put back, and in the Internet



age, governmental control of information has become almost impossible. As implied by Zhang Yimou, even though censorship in China is still rigid, the Fifth Generation have been able to view most recent foreign films and they have learned to avoid sensitive topics and to express their thoughts under such disguise as historical stories.¹⁰

During the last decade, partially as a result of the rapid economic growth, Chinese people experienced a drastic diversification of ideas and attitudes. Film professionals now tend to view Hollywood films with more skepticism, because, besides reasons mentioned previously in this essay, most of them become more defensive to the arrogance of American (including Chinese American) critics who, although they know little about the history of the Chinese cinema, constantly attribute the Fifth Generation's success to the paternalism of Hollywood. The following is not uncommon of reviews written in America:

Though in many ways an admirable filmmaker, he [Zhang Yimou] is doomed to be a cinephile's curiosity, notable primarily for a style that harks back without embarrassment to Fifties Hollywood.¹¹

Now more conscious of their own identity and cultural heritage, the Fifth Generation filmmakers find this kind of remark more offensive. When studying as a visiting artist in Cinema Studies at New York University, Chen Kaige was asked if he planned to make films in and about America. "I'm a Chinese filmmaker," Chen answered tersely, "I want to make films in and about China."¹² This of course does not suggest that Chen was ungrateful for the chance to study American films in America. Before returning to China, he told me that he had been like a fish that used to be confined to a small pond but after his study at NYU, he felt that he had entered a big lake that enabled him to swim with big fish (i.e., established directors from the US and other countries).¹³

On one hand, Chinese filmmakers think that international film festivals, particularly American ones, have not received them fairly; on the other hand, they feel that domestic politics in China has weakened their creative power to compete efficiently with film superpowers like Hollywood. When Zhang Yimou's *To Live* succeeded at a film festival, he expressed his delight in a tone of resentment.

I am happy for Gong Li [the female lead in *To Live*] and Ge You [the male lead], not simply because they both received awards for their performances in my film. What makes me feel more excited is that their awards prove that European and American gentlemen have started acknowledging our performers. While appreciating Chinese films, they no longer focus on superficial oriental exoticism; instead they are now able to pay attention to our performers' portrayal of the characters. They do not keep pursuing Chinese films with a novelty-hunting mentality anymore but compare them [with films made in other countries] from the perspective of the human race. I hope Chinese performers will keep winning awards.¹⁴

Now viewing Hollywood as a rival, the Fifth Generation are unwilling to acknowledge their learning from Hollywood. They would cite Chinese directors like Fei Mu, rather than Hollywood directors, as their models.¹⁵ Occasionally, the frustration they experienced dealing with Western critics and festival committees affects their attitude toward the West in general. Once Zhang Yimou bluntly claims, Americans "don't understand foreigners' feelings",¹⁶ and "they are unable to understand the deep metaphysical frustrations of the characters [in *Raise the Red Lantern*], but I think they can understand the superficial ones. For me that is enough."¹⁷ Chen Kaige also maintains, "there is a huge gap between Chinese and Westerners."¹⁸

In the last decade, as this kind of sentiment developed, a new term came into being: "Hollywoodism" ("Haolaiwu

Posters of Hollywood films are favored by Chinese collectors. Very often the English titles are poeticized; *The Wizard of Oz* is translated as "Traces of Fairies in the Green Wilderness," and *Tin Cup*, "The Sky of Passion and Love."



《廊桥遗梦》：

爱已去 缘未了

■ 连子

中，她几乎想抛开一切，要随罗伯特远走高飞。但她最终选择了留下，她流着泪对罗伯特说她走后她的丈夫理查德将在当地人的闲言碎语中度过余生，这对理查德不公平，不管走到多远，她都会为此受到良心的谴责。她说一个女人有了家庭和孩子，便不能不兼顾对他们的责任。“爱情是有魔力的，但爱情放弃了责任就毫无魔力可言”，弗郎西丝卡痛苦地与罗伯特分手，她知道此爱已逝，今生今世罗伯特永不会再现。

自导自演的伊斯特伍德非常注重演员的即兴表演，在这部电影情节简单、纯粹靠演员把握激情戏、推动剧情发展的影片里，伊斯特伍德与演技高超的斯特里普搭档合演，配合默契，张弛有致，达到炉火纯青的地步。两次不舍离别，将两人的感情表达得充分而明确。弗郎西丝卡决定随罗伯特离去，她穿着红色连衣裙，提着两只皮箱欢快地下楼，来到等待她的罗伯特身边。就在一刹那间，她反悔了，默默的，继而流着泪喋喋不休。同样悲伤不堪的罗伯特紧紧搂住弗郎西丝卡，说她不必忙着做出决定，他在小镇上还能呆几天，他可以等待，他的目光里流露出殷殷期盼。弗郎西丝卡与罗伯特最后的分别是在几天后那个大雨滂沱的雨天，弗郎西丝卡与丈夫到小镇上分头购物，她买好了东西坐在车里，心有所思，目光搜寻着大雨中的小镇。她看到了那辆熟悉的雪佛莱旧卡车，罗伯特从车中走出，冒着大雨神情专注，一步一步朝她走来。弗郎西丝卡呆呆地凝视罗伯特。这时，理查德回到车上。三个人的关系第一次进入现实的无言的交织中，此时无声胜有声。十字路口，罗伯特的雪佛莱车开到了他们的面前，透过大雨婆娑的玻璃，弗郎西丝卡看见罗伯特手里晃动着那根她送他的信物项链。罗伯特把项链悬挂在醒目的反光镜上，他知道弗郎西丝卡在看他，他在等待着，做最后的努力向她发出邀请。绿灯亮了，雪佛莱车无动于衷，理查德不耐烦地催促着。泪眼模糊的弗郎西丝卡紧紧抓住车门把，心如潮涌，她一点点地挪动着把手，内心挣扎着。终于，雪佛莱亮起在边尾灯拐弯离去，消逝在蒙蒙雨中，罗伯特走了。弗郎西丝卡失声痛哭，她明白结束了，一切都结束了。二人世界既富激情又理智成熟，心理矛盾有层次的把握，一步一步推向高潮。重情而不任性，理智而兼及感情理想，斯特里普在反复抑制之后的留恋和表达催人泪下。

九十年代，由于美国经济衰退，社会不安定，一切社会问题被浮华掩盖，人们面临着道德沦丧，信仰虚无，越发渴望寻求现实中难以得到的真诚的东西，影片《廊桥遗梦》也就更让人看了别是一番滋味在心头。

The Bridges of Madison County provided Chinese people with a new perspective to look at extramarital affairs. The title of the article reads, “*Bridges of Madison County—Love is Gone, Destined Fate Stays.*”



zhuiyi”。Whenever this term is used, a disapproving overture is added; once the entertainment is politicized, differences of tastes become conflicts between cultures. The term “Hollywoodism” is new but the resentment is not. The distrust between the East and the West has been mutual and historical. As Jay Leyda points out, “In the same way that Chinese worried about the portrayal of Chinese in foreign films, Europeans worried about the opportunity to see European and American self-portraits on Asian screens.”¹⁹

Though both are negative, the Chinese film artists' view of Hollywoodism is fundamentally different from the government's. The former is often based on facts (though sometimes the available facts may not be accurate) and the latter, always on political necessity. Even among Chinese film artists and scholars, opinions about Hollywood are historically complicated and diversified, because some of them are reflective of personal views and researches, and others are dutiful as official assignments. Comparatively speaking, however, Chinese artists' and scholars' views in the 1990s are less influenced by politics, but governmental views are still political. Several Hollywood films appeared outside China when Jiang Zemin was visiting the United States: *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Red Corner*, and *Kundun*, which present both China's judicial system and its policy on Tibet negatively. For Hollywood, Jiang's visit to the U.S. was an opportune moment to promote films with Chinese themes. Their incentive was more commercial than political, but Chinese official media certainly did not feel that way. Unable to separate Hollywood from the American government, official media in China launched a campaign against Hollywood, accusing it for serving “reactionary forces.” Several times, Hollywood was berated by *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*, the most important governmental newspaper). *Outlook Magazine* (*Liaowang*, a governmental magazine for overseas Chinese), also censured Hollywood with unusually extreme language.²⁰

The very existence of diverse opinions about Hollywood films is a testimony to the conflicting attitudes of contemporary Chinese towards American culture. The arrangement of articles in *Contemporary Cinema*, the official bimonthly of the Chinese Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, is indicative of these conflicting attitudes. In their second issue of 1998, the first article is a eulogy of the late Prime Minister, “Zhou Enlai: the Founder of the People's Film”; then an orthodox analysis of Hollywood, “American Film: the Rhetoric Hegemony and the Ideological Fairytale”; toward the end of the contents, we find a recommendation of an apolitical film, “*The Eloquent Space Melody that Heralds a New Age: A Comment on the Trilogy of Star Wars.*”

Contemporary Chinese critics, either conservative or liberal, tend to over-read Hollywood films. In an analysis of the ten Hollywood films that were legally imported to China,²¹ Wang Tao thinks those films exhibit “modern people's desire to overcome the bondage inflicted upon them physically and spiritually by modern society ... In *True Lies* the heroine finally fulfills her dream of becoming a CIA agent. It is really a heroic challenge to the banality of daily life.”²² Wang's is a bold and unusual remark, given the fact that not long ago the CIA was still regarded as the worst enemy of the Chinese people. Furthermore, the

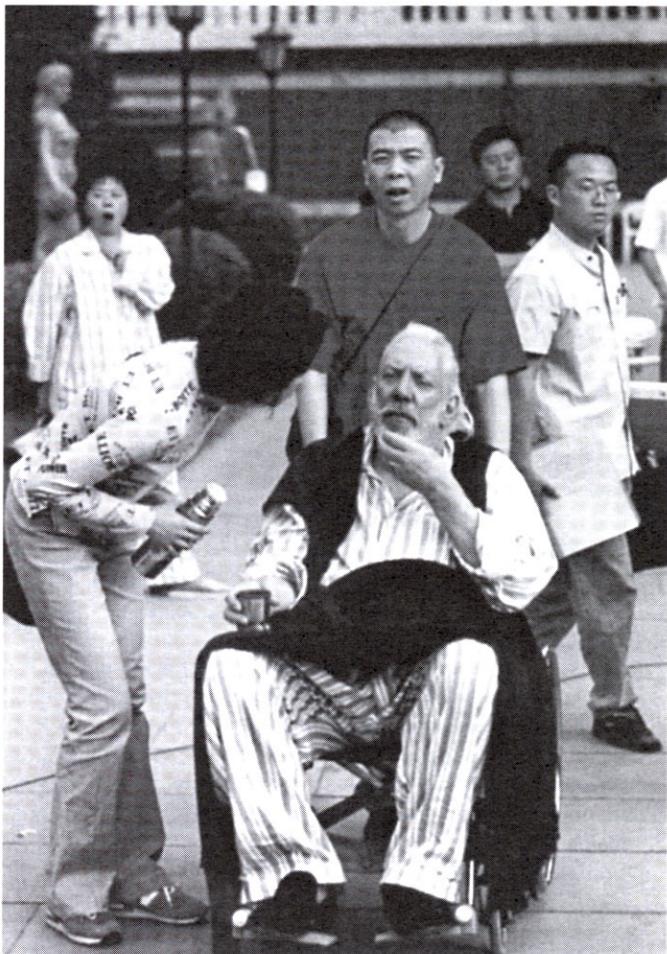
author politicizes Hollywood's treatment of family and marriage positively:

The Bridges of Madison County is the most commendable of the ten films. It provides us with the tenderness of classical romanticism, when male and female relationships in the contemporary West are troubled by AIDS. Westerners are now returning to the affections of their classical era to rescue themselves and their culture.²³

The most interesting part of Wang Tao's comment lies not in his definition of Western classicism but in his speculation about the modern West. After a half century's official rejection of American family and social values, he now believes that *The Bridges of Madison County* and the other nine Hollywood films are "concerned with contemporary issues ... in protecting the earth [ecology], the family, and the human race." In Wang's opinion, these Hollywood products are "more profound than Chinese films made by Zhang Yimou, etc." and they will help "usher in a brand-new era for Chinese film and art."²⁴ Wang may sound generous in his appraisal of the ten films, but their impact in China was indeed stronger than in America. It was almost revolutionary in China, where extramarital affairs had been considered sinful, a film like *The Bridges of Madison County* was not only forgiven but also esteemed. In spite of the government's efforts, when China opened its door for economic reasons, the influence of Western morals cannot any more be shut out. *The Bridges of Madison County* aroused a nationwide discussion, because it provided Chinese with a fresh moral standard that was more contemporary and more humane. In "The Epiphany of Modern Love: an Analysis of *The Bridges of Madison County*," Zhang Dong extends his appreciation for *The Bridges of Madison County* to other Hollywood domestic themes and summarizes them as means for a new kind of escapism:

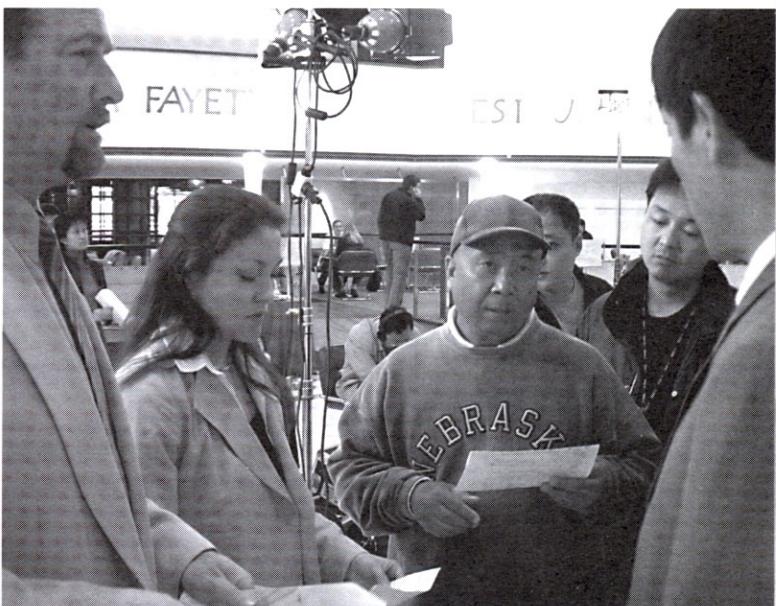
From *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Ordinary People*, *Fatal Attraction* to *The Bridges of Madison County*, all of them promote a single theme: to cherish love and family. ... How do they cope with the boredom of day to day life? Is there a way to excite them without hurting their families? Yes, there is one: film. Film is at its best when it takes the risk on behalf of the masses. On one hand, it satisfies the audience's subconscious yearning for adventure and excitement, providing them with an outlet for their emotions; on the other it does not present any danger to real life.²⁵

Actually, Hollywood has done nothing new. It has always tried to satisfy the audience's yearning for adventure and excitement by fabricating dreams for them. What is new is that many Chinese, including some defenders of Communist doctrines, welcome the dreams again and treat their heroes as role models. While purist critics on both sides of the Pacific share the same opinion that James Cameron is a craftsman not an artist, Jiang Zemin said on three different occasions that he liked *The Titanic* and asked Chinese filmmakers to learn from it. It is now Chinese scholars' turns to criticize Hollywood. In his "The *Titanic*: A Summary of Film



ABOVE *Dawan (Big Shot's Funeral)* a comedy directed by Feng Xiaogang in 2001, was funded by Columbia in the US and Huayi in China.

BETWEEN *CEO* directed by Wu Tianming and shot in US, Germany, France as well as in China, is one of the three films funded by the Chinese government in 2002.



Industry in This Century," Ni Zhen holds that *The Titanic* is a success of cold-blooded speculation on the audience's appetite for sensation and sensuality.²⁶

A century has elapsed. The quintessence of Hollywood remains unchanged, but China's response to Hollywood has changed many times. Since 1989, studies on American cinema have become more specific and no longer confined to the most popular Hollywood films. Films made by female directors, independent directors, and minorities (especially by directors of Chinese origins such as Ang Lee, John Woo, and Wayne Wang) have gained more attention from the Chinese film circle. The term "Hollywoodism" invented by Chinese film critics has been defined and redefined. An objective evaluation of Hollywood seems to be taking shape in China, because some Chinese professionals are now able to reexamine not only Hollywood but also themselves. Wang Chaoguang lists three reasons for anti-Hollywoodism in China during the last century: First, Hollywood promotes "decadent Western cultural concept"; second, it is commercially oriented; third, it hinders the development of Chinese film. Then, "from a more open-minded perspective," he proceeds, "we may reach different conclusions":

... in the past the so-called "pornographic" films may have included those that had shots of [girls in] swimming suits. But our standards have changed tremendously. American films may not be perfect and they do contain certain contents that are not appropriate in the Chinese context. Nevertheless they enable Chinese people to learn about the unique aspects of Western culture. Their art and technique please Chinese audiences and set examples for Chinese filmmakers. In the exchanges between China and foreign countries, they play a role. It is justifiable for American film companies to make money if the market competition is fair. ... [In China] artists have tried hard to resist the negative influence of Hollywood and to promote Chinese films. Entrepreneurs have argued that as long as [Chinese] films are well-done, they will have an audience, no matter if we import American films or not.²⁷

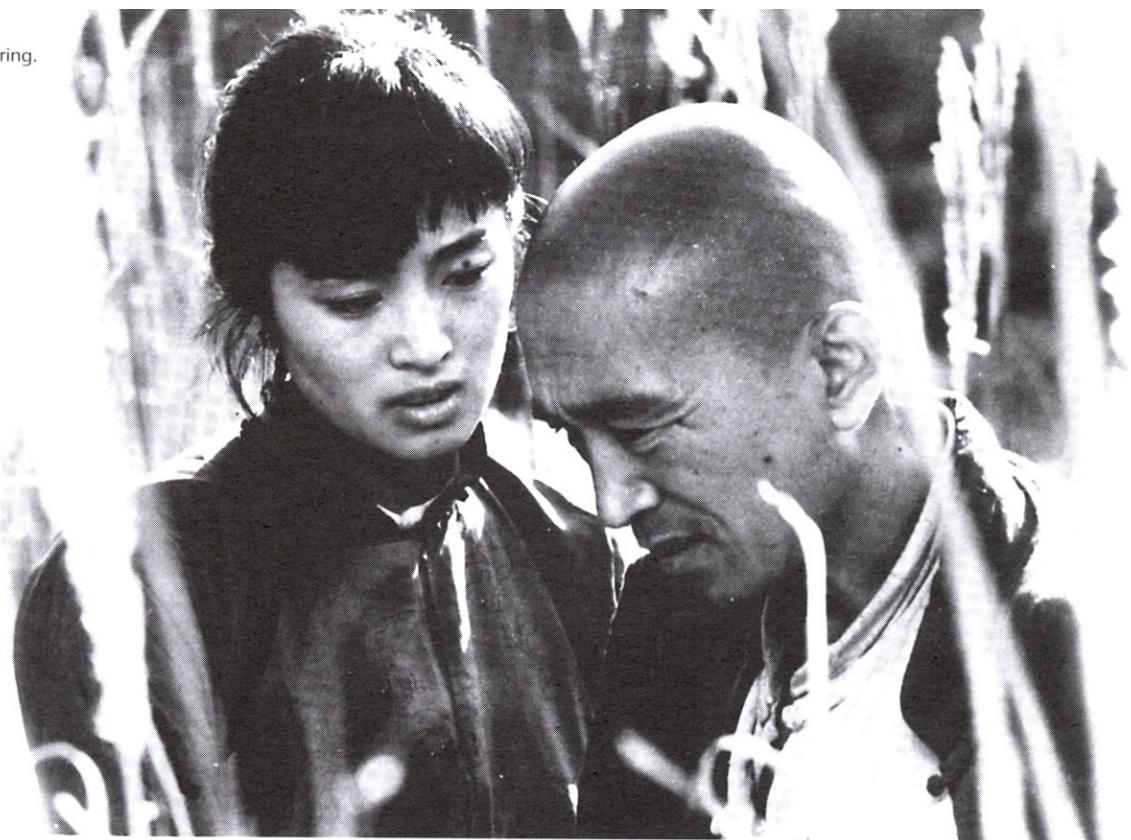
Following Jiang Zemin's example, Ding Guangen, the chief of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of CPC, confessed that, in his youthful years, he was also a Hollywood fan and agreed to import more films from Hollywood. Due to the incident of the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Ding's promise was not fulfilled. But, since China has entered WTO, Hollywood films will enter China more freely; a time the Chinese government expects cautiously, Chinese audiences wait for gladly and impatiently, and Chinese film circles anticipate with mixed feelings. Chinese opinions about Hollywood will be even more diversified. No matter how this is going to happen, it, like the Chinese entrance to WTO, will be beneficial for both China and Hollywood.

Tan Ye studied Canadian and American Theaters at the University of Toronto and Comparative Theater at Washington University. Now as an associate professor, he teaches Chinese and Comparative Theater at the University of South Carolina.

1. "Watching American Electrical Light Shadow Play," *Play Journal* (Youxibao), no. 74. September 5, 1897. Throughout the essay, all the

Chinese-English translations and emphases are mine.

2. Li Shaobai, "Historical Background of Chinese Film Development" ("Zhongguo dianying fasheng de lishi wenhua beijing"), *Film and TV Culture* (Yingshi wenhua), vol. 4: 68.
3. Cheng Jihua, et al. *The History of Chinese Cinema* (Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi). Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1962: 13.
4. Chen Huangmei, "Republication Preface" to *The History of Chinese Cinema*. Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1981: 2-3.
5. The war between the Communists and the Nationalists, 1927-1937.
6. Until now the division of the generations of Chinese film directors is still not finalized, the following is a compromise of several contradicting but influential opinions:
The First Generation (1905 — 1937) starts from the Silent Films and ends at the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan.
The Second Generation (1937 — 1949) covers the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) and the Third Civil War (1945-1949), which is also referred to as War Era.
The Third Generation (1949 — 1978) starts from Communists taking over the Mainland China till two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).
The Fourth Generation (1978 — 1983) starts after the death of Mao and ends shortly after the Fifth Generation's graduation from Beijing Film Academy.
The Fifth Generation (1983 — 1989) starts at their first film *One and Eight* and ends at the Tiananmen Square Incident.
The Sixth Generation (1989 — 1996) is the new generation of Post-Tiananmen era.
7. Grace D. Liu's letter on 22 April 1949 to *The Saturday Evening Post* quoted from Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*: 466.
8. Wang Yang, the director of Beijing Film Studio was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, because, among other things, he thought Greta Garbo's eyes "could talk" and asked his actresses to learn from her.
9. My interview with Li Tuo on January 3, 1996. Most of my interviews in this essay will appear in my new book, *The Complexity of Culture: Chinese Cinema after Mao*.
10. My interview with Zhang Yimou on January 2, 1998. For details see "From 5th Generation to 6th Generation," *Film Quarterly* University of California Press (Berkeley) Vol. 53, No. 2 Fall 99
11. Stuart Klawans, "Zhang Yimou: Local Hero," *Film Comment*, Sept - Oct 1995: 13.
12. Berenice Reynaud, "Distant Mirror: the Cinema of Chen Kaige," *The Independent*, Oct 1992: 28.
13. My conversation with Chen Kaige in the summer of 1980.
14. Lan Zuwei, "Zhang Yimou Expresses Feelings Through Overseas Phone Call," *United Daily* (Lianhe bao), May 26, 1994: 5.
15. "Cinematographer's Exposition," in *Huashuo huangtudi*: 288.
16. Lian Taichun. "About *Red Sorghum*: Zhang Yimou Answers Audience's Questions in Nanjing," *Guangming Daily* (Guangming ribao) May 6, 1988: 3.
17. Lawrence Chua, "Red Flag: China, Zhang Yimou, and *Raise the Red Lantern*," *Off-Hollywood Report*, Winter, 1992: 73.
18. Berenice Reynaud, "Distant Mirror: the Cinema of Chen Kaige," *The Independent*, Oct 1992: 28.
19. Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*: 33.
20. "Hollywood Raised A Rock Only to Drop It on Its Own Foot," *Outlook Magazine* (Liao Wang), 1998, 7: 46.
21. Ten is the maximum set by the Chinese authority for Hollywood films to be imported to China annually. However, there are countless pirated VCDs and DVDs on the Chinese black market. When teaching at Shanghai Theater Academy in December 1997, I was surprised to find out that the students had seen almost all the recent Hollywood films.
22. Wang Tao, "Reading the Ten Imported Films from the Perspective of East-West Culture," *Film Art* (Diangying yizhu), 1997, 3: 79.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid, 83.
25. Zhang Dong, "The Revelation of Modern People's Love: Analytical Appreciation of *The Bridges of Madison County*," *Film Art*, 1996, 4: 86-7.
26. *Popular Cinema* (Dazhong dianying), 1998, 6: 26-7.
27. "A Study of American Films on Chinese Market in the Years of the Republic of China," *Film Art*, 1: 59.



To Live and Dye in China

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN ZHANG YIMOU'S *JUDOU*

by Vincent Brook

"You should have plugged it up."

Tianqing to Judou (in *Judou*)

The allegorical content in many of Zhang Yimou's films has frequently been acknowledged: gruesome past standing in for repressive present; feudal-era subjugation of women mirroring oppression not only of their Communist-era counterparts but of Chinese citizens in general in the post-Maoist People's Republic.¹ What has largely been overlooked is how metaphor in a major work such as *Judou* (1989) can be extended to Zhang's own life experiences, particularly his controversial romantic liaison with the film's star, Gong Li, and his contentious political relations with the Mainland Chinese regime.² *Judou*, from this perspective, can be regarded as an intensely personal text. This is not to deny the film's symptomatic or historically contingent meanings or to favor a "self"-indulgent, narrowly auteurist reading. It is, however, to acknowledge that the biographical and the ideological intersect in *Judou* to an inordinate degree. The tale of doomed lovers who meet in a dye mill, a setting uncannily evocative of a film studio/processing lab, is redolent of the circumstances surrounding Zhang's own struggles with the Communist regime, struggles that are readily transcribable onto those of the Chinese people as a whole.

The dye mill, where the lovers' carnal passions are aroused and where they meet their tragic fate, is the key trope in the film. By folding this symbol of the cinematic apparatus back into the biographically informed narrative, and by imbricating its technological sense of "cinematic machine" with its psychoanalytic inflection of "mental machine,"



Director Zhang Yimou and Gong Li on the set of *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)

this essay will examine the ways in which cinema generally, and specifically in relation to the life and work of Zhang Yimou, can be seen as enabling yet also frustrating desire on both the personal and political levels.

Any attempt to link the "self" of the filmmaker with the political ramifications of his work demands, almost by definition, some form of auteurist approach. I am fully aware of the pitfalls, from a poststructuralist standpoint, of such an approach: the tendency to isolate and overestimate individual elements in a collaborative medium; the privileging of artist's intention over social and political forces.³ To minimize these limitations, I will employ a nuanced auteurism drawn from a notion of Jenny Kwok Wah Lau's (derived from Paul Ricoeur), of the text as a "double world." Text, in this sense, is perceived not as ahistorical or autonomous but as the function of a dialectic between autonomous text and discourse; between the *semiotic* sphere, which explains what is said, and the *semantic* sphere, which points toward and appropriates a world projected by the text.⁴ Embedded in this "projected world," no less than the historical reader, is the text's biographical author. With this adjustment, a methodology emerges that neither buries the author nor canonizes her/him, yet that provides a hermeneutical space within which s/he can "operate."⁵

Auteurism, Chinese Style

In the historical period known as the New Chinese Cinema (1983-present), Zhang Yimou remains inseparably linked with the so-called "Fifth Generation" filmmakers. The term "Fifth Generation" was first used by Chinese film critics in

1984 to describe a group of *zhiqing* ("young urban intellectual") directors engaged in bold explorations of content and style.⁶ The term allegedly referred to the group's status as the fifth graduating class of the Beijing Film Academy, which was founded in 1955. However, such a tabulation fails to work out mathematically. A broader chronological explanation places the Fifth Generation in the framework of Chinese cinema history: First Generation (1905-1937), from the silent era through the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan; Second Generation (1937-1949), from the war with Japan through the Civil War; Third Generation (1949-1978), from the Communist takeover of Mainland China through the death of Mao and the reopening of the Beijing Film Academy, which had been closed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); Fourth Generation (1978-1983), from the reopening of the film academy through the graduation of its first post-reopening class; Fifth Generation (1983-1989), from the first film by a member of this graduating class, Zhang Junzhao's *One and Eight*, through the Tiananmen Square Massacre. This division, however, has never been agreed upon.⁷ "Fifth Generation's" actual significance more likely has to do with a sense of tradition, and a breaking away from tradition. The fifth generation in a Chinese family is considered a symbol of longevity and good fortune. When members of this generation die, they are given the rare privilege of being laid out in red, a traditional color of celebration. Yet red, in post-1949 China, is also the color of revolution.⁸ Thus, as Tony Rayns suggests, Fifth Generation "implies some kind of new beginning and stress-

Zhang Yimou



es the distance that separates the young directors from their 'Fourth Generation' predecessors. Calling them 'Fifth Generation' is a characteristically Chinese way of saying that they represent a 'new wave'”⁹

Fifth Generation filmmakers had no quarrel with the "new wave" designation; indeed, they appear to have reveled in it. Due to Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping's "modernization" campaign and concomitant "opening" to the West, the Fifth Generation was the first group of Chinese film students to be exposed to the French and European new waves of the 1960s.¹⁰ The Fifth Generation was also more theoretically inclined than previous "generations," reflecting an interest in Chinese film circles at the time in Siegfried Kracauer and the "father of the French New Wave," André Bazin.¹¹ Analogous to the *nouvelle vague*'s rejection of mainstream Western cinema and the "tradition of quality," the Fifth Generation's mission was "an act of rebellion against the artistic strictures of Maoism."¹² When Mao wasn't rejecting cinema altogether as a decadent Western cultural form—such as during the Cultural Revolution—he was prescribing socialist realism or its Chinese variant, the "revolutionary model opera," as the sole acceptable filmmaking style.¹³ In contrast, Zhou Chuanji, Zhang's professor at the Beijing Academy, explicitly invoked the French New Wave by referring to Zhang's intention (as cinematographer on Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* [1984]) to "forget all the rules."¹⁴ Zhang himself, in an interview in 1985, paraphrased Jean-Luc Godard by asserting, "[M]y generation has to start from ground zero."¹⁵

Inextricably bound to the Western new waves, if not a precondition for them, was the so-called "auteur theory," arising

from the critical writings of Bazin, Alexandre Astruc, and François Truffaut, and later popularized in the United States by Andrew Sarris.¹⁶ With its insistence on regarding film as an art form and its—for the time—revolutionary privileging of the director over the producer as the mainstay of the creative process, auteurism provided both theoretical underpinning and critical cachet for the emerging "new cinemas."¹⁷ Although renounced in the late 1960s by the very journal that engendered it, *Cahiers du cinema*, and all but dismantled by the "Cultural Revolution" in critical theory of the 1970s (with its own French "Gang of Four": Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan), auteurism remains a prime source of legitimacy for national cinemas undergoing institutional transformation and creative flowering. Indeed, like a banished cadre returning after a period of political re-education, some form of auteurism seems to re-emerge every time a new "new wave" is proclaimed.

Of the Fifth Generation's "big three" directors—the other two being Tian Zhuangzhuang (*On the Hunting Ground*, *The Horse Thief*, *The Blue Kite*, *Springtime in a Small Town*), and Chen Kaige (*Yellow Earth*, *King of the Children*, *The Big Parade*, *Farewell My Concubine*)—Zhang Yimou is without question the most internationally acclaimed.¹⁸ Virtually every one of his works has garnered a notable award.¹⁹ His first directorial effort, *Red Sorghum* (1987), won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. In China the film was a sensation, winning all three national awards and out-grossing not only kung-fu films but Bernardo Bertolucci's Oscar-winning *The Last Emperor*.²⁰ Zhang's third and fourth films, *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), were the first two Chinese films ever nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.²¹ Zhang was



Cinematic foreplay: *Judou* wraps her arms around Tianqing's bare chest, cueing the dying machine to start rolling and the couple's love making to begin.

honored with a retrospective of his work as cinematographer, actor, and director at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 1995. Adding to the glamour was his long relationship, professional and romantic, with Gong Li, the actress whose international stardom Zhang helped launch. The Chinese popular press was mesmerized by his early accomplishments, depicting Zhang as "an elemental force of Chinese creativity: a genius, maestro, wizard, demigod, a meteor blazing in our skies."²² Western writers succumbed to a similar delirium: Rayns, for example, claimed that "the dominant creative personality" on *The One and the Eight* was not its director, Zhang Junzhao, but its cinematographer, Zhang Yimou;²³ the *New York Times* similarly asserted, about Chen's *The Big Parade* (1986), "From the impressive overhead shots of troops assembling...to the final slow-motion close-

ups of the parading, the camera of Zhang Yimou commands *The Big Parade*.²⁴

Auteurist excess notwithstanding, the silver cloud had a dark lining. Despite Zhang's unparalleled success abroad, he would be subjected to persistent criticism and harassment by the Chinese government. While other members of the Fifth Generation (notably, Tian and Chen) have faced political pressures from the Communist regime, Zhang's persecution, some of it even predating the Cultural Revolution, has far surpassed that of his compatriots. The main source of his troubles: a "bad" political and class background.²⁵ Zhang's father and two uncles graduated from the Kuomintang military academy and fought on the nationalist side during the Civil War. One uncle emigrated to Taiwan; the father remained, only to be "assigned a residence" (a modified form of house arrest).²⁶ Already as a child, Zhang suffered discrimination and abuse.²⁷ At 16, during the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to the countryside (as would be, eventually, most of the Fifth Generation). He worked on a farm for three years, at a textile factory for seven. Despite this patriotic service, his "past" continued to plague him. Twice he was refused admission to the reopened Beijing Film Academy, allegedly for being over age (he was 27), finally receiving "special dispensation" after writing an appeal to the Ministry of Culture.²⁸ Even his meteoric rise as a filmmaker failed to assuage the authorities. The government tried to pull *Judou* from Academy Award consideration; their attempt was foiled, but Zhang was forbidden to attend the Oscar ceremony. Both *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were banned from exhibition in China, and the ban was lifted only after Zhang made the "acceptable" *The Story of Qi Ju* in 1992. Periodically, Zhang has been forced to abase himself before officialdom. In 1994 he was forbidden to start filming *Shanghai Triad* for the French Company UGC, ostensibly as punishment for submitting *To Live* to Cannes before it had been cleared by the Chinese Film Bureau—a clearance the film has yet to receive.

Despite his recent string of "politically correct" films (*Keep Cool* [1997], *Not One Less* [1999], *The Road Home* [2000], *Happy Times* [2002]), *To Live* (1994) remains the lone film of Zhang's yet to be released in China.²⁹ Starting with *Shanghai Triad* (1995), Zhang was placed on a five-film "probation," during which time he was prohibited from working with foreign companies. In addition, he was made to submit a written "self-criticism," concluding with a plea "that the great and good would overlook the errors of a humble and insignificant individual like [myself]."³⁰ The document was publicized overseas but suppressed in China, where the humiliating public display would have been a reminder of the Cultural Revolution and the language of feudal times.³¹ An ironic reminder, certainly, for "feudal times" was precisely the period Zhang tended to favor for the setting of his films.

The Staging of Desire

“A small village somewhere in China in the 1920s”: so explains a superimposed title at the outset of *Judou*. Placing the story in the pre-Communist past served other purposes besides its susceptibility to allegorical treatment.³² First, it related to Zhang’s (and his *zhiqing* compatriots’) experiences during the Cultural Revolution. For Berenice Reynaud, this allusion provided a means for Fifth Generation filmmakers to “explore secret wounds, reenact the loss of innocence, and the collapse of utopia” resulting from the clash of youthful idealism and the brutal realities of rural China.³³ Second, as Zhang explained in an interview, “China is a peasant nation....China’s land, its population, its ideology and many other things, all belong to the countryside.”³⁴ Third, and most “self”-reflexively, Zhang was raised in a provincial town in northern China; his appearance is described as “short, stocky, with a crew-cut,...like an average farm boy.”³⁵ This background and description are remarkably close to that of *Judou*’s bow-legged, shaven-headed male lead, Tianqing (played by Li Baotian).

Tianqing’s work place and residence is the film’s central location and its major metaphor: the old dye mill. Rey Chow notes that the mill is one of numerous changes Zhang made in Liu Heng’s novella *Fuxi, Fuxi*, on which *Judou* was based. Chow suggests that the mill was added “so that the audience can see the drama of colors.”³⁶ Certainly, the long strips of lush colored cloth and vats of steaming dye, as well as the anthropomorphic dyeing machine, provide striking visuals. Regarded in terms of its narrative significance, however, and in conjunction with Zhang’s lived experience, the mill and its accoutrements emerge as a grand metaphor for the cinematic apparatus.

A body of influential film theory has developed around the concept of the cinematic apparatus. Deriving from the work of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry in the 1970s, apparatus theory mobilizes psychoanalytic and ideological models drawn from Lacan and Althusser to rigorously interrogate film spectatorship. The cinematic apparatus, in this formulation, incorporates the cinematic institution in the broad sense; that is, “not just the cinema industry...but also the *mental machinery*—another industry—which spectators ‘accustomed to the cinema’ have internalized historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films.”³⁷ This internalization is grounded in cinema’s alleged construction of a dream state for the film audience. The darkened room of the theater, reduced motor activity and heightened visual perception combine to propel the spectator into a dream-like state, one that primes the viewer for ideological positioning by the apparatus. This “ideological effect” is further predicated, for Baudry, on the ontological link between the images on the screen and the scientific/aesthetic principles of the camera. Having incorporated the optical rules of Renaissance perspective into the monocular vision of the motion picture camera, cinema compels the spectator to regard all filmed objects as if viewed from a fixed point, which is conceived as the central and sole source of meaning. A “transcendental subject” is thus produced, whose sense of individual mastery is reinforced through the narrative unity of the diegesis and whose idealized (and naturalized) construction is used to justify and provide support for the dominant order.³⁸

Metz’s deconstruction of the cinematic apparatus, while intersecting with Baudry’s ideologically, expands upon it psychoanalytically. For Metz, the dream state encouraged by film

viewing ensnares the viewer through a “double identification” with the cinematic apparatus. *Primary identification* is not with the characters on the screen (this is *secondary identification*, and is a more pre-conscious process) but with “the act of looking” itself. Here the fantasmatic conditions of the viewing situation, enhanced by the placement of the projector behind the head of the spectator, guide the spectator to imagine him/herself as the “focus of all vision...as a pure act of perception.”³⁹

“Cinematic apparatus,” as applied to the dye mill in *Judou*, is extended, in the technological sense, from its recording and viewing functions (relating to the film studio and theater) to its *processing* functions (relating to the film laboratory)—without which, of course, the phenomenon of (pre-electronic) cinema would have remained entirely on the mental plane. Established initially (and repeatedly) in high-angle long shot, the mill’s enclosure is rectangular, box-like, with two openings to the sky. The more prominent opening features colored swaths of cloth protruding vertically beyond the roof line, apparently for drying in the sun. The first film studios were mostly open-air or, like Edison’s seminal “Black Maria,” had skylights to allow for adequate exposure of the film stock. The dye mill’s interior opens onto a courtyard bordered by a horizontal screen partition, which provides a wall between the courtyard and the master bedroom. The “master’s” wife, Judou (Gong Li), is often framed (when not beside the colored strips) beside the backlit screen. Taking up most of the interior is the imposing wooden dye-mill mechanism, a complex of giant wheels, spools, gears, and drive shafts that combine to roll the cloth strips down into the dyeing vats and back up for drying. One of the first motion picture cameras, the Lumière brothers’ *cinematographe*, famously combined the essential functions of camera, projector, and printer in one astonishingly lightweight and portable machine. Adjusted, Claes Oldenburg-style, for scale, the mill’s dyeing vats are symbolically transmuted into *developing tanks*, the swaths of cloth into *film strips*, and the wooden mechanism into a combination *processing machine/camera/projector*. Zhang, and art director Gao Jiuping, have, in essence, manufactured their own *cinematographe*—less portable but even more multi-purpose than the original, for this one has a “movie studio” and a “theater” (or at least a “screening room”) included for good measure.

Visual evidence is bolstered by biographical information. Zhang’s interest in film stemmed from photography. He reputedly sold his own blood to buy his first camera.⁴⁰ His prime area of study at the Beijing Film Academy was cinematography. His first professional film work was as cinematographer on seminal Fifth Generation films such as *One and Eight*, *Yellow Earth*, and *The Big Parade*. The symbolism of *Judou*’s most striking visual feature, the red- and yellow-colored strips of cloth, is supported by another extratextual detail relating to the Chinese film industry as a whole. When Hollywood switched over to single-strip Technicolor in the 1950s and 1960s, much of its classic three-strip Technicolor equipment was dismantled and sold to China. This is the camera and laboratory process Zhang was trained in at the BFA and later used professionally; it is also one reason Fifth Generation films in general, and *Judou* in particular, have such rich, deeply saturated color.⁴¹

The filmic metaphor extends beyond its overdetermined inscription in the mise-en-scene to extensive imbrication in the diegesis and narrative structure. The story’s inciting inci-

dent is a blatant act of voyeurism: Tianqing's peeping at Judou through a small hole in the wall while she bathes. The psychoanalytic linkage of cinematic pleasure and the psychic mechanism of scopophilia is another prominent feature of apparatus theory. Voyeuristic pleasure, for Metz, is mobilized both by the darkened viewing situation of the movie theater and by its key-hole-like viewing practice, as well as by the distance from—indeed, the “lack” of—the characters fictively represented on the screen. Fetishistic pleasure is similarly activated by the viewing environment and by replication of the requisite “distance” between object desired (in this case, the maternal phallus) and object represented (the phallic substitute). Fetishistic satisfaction further benefits from a core component it shares with cinema: disavowal—“I know very well, but all the same...”⁴²

Metz's emphasis on voyeurism and fetishism as the psychic underpinnings of cinematic pleasure implies, but fails to name, the phallogocentric nature of this dynamic. Laura Mulvey's canonical 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” foregrounds this theoretical “missing link,” positing a *gendered* pleasure in fiction film constructed primarily for and around the “male gaze,” with “woman as image” and “man as the bearer of the look.”⁴³ This “politics of pleasure” is grounded psychically in sexual attraction (voyeurism) and narcissistic identification (fetishism), and is inscribed in the cinematic apparatus through a tripartite connection with the “looking relations” of the film's narratively active characters, the camera, and the audience watching the film (all three “looks” identified with and controlled by the male).⁴⁴

Judou's peeping scene pointedly deconstructs Metz's and Mulvey's “scopic regime.” Aware that she is being spied on by Tianqing, Judou first angrily tries to block the peephole/“view-finder”; then she changes her mind and decides not only to let her “secret” admirer continue his peeping but to expose for him the ugly wounds inflicted on her body by her abusive and much older husband, Jinshan (Xia Rujin). As W. A. Callahan points out, this is a “political decision,” both in the act and what it reveals.⁴⁵ Similarly, for Lau, Judou's action “represents a decisive move against the gerontocratic and patriarchal rule that operates against her.”⁴⁶ As she lifts her head slowly and directs her tearful gaze toward Tianqing, Judou challenges the scopic regime to its very foundation. As Chow explains, Judou, by her brazen act, is taking into her own hands the “to-be-looked-at-ness” that conventionally constitutes femininity....She exhibits her female body for the male gaze literally, in the manner that one cites a well-used platitude. The effect of this gesture—of quoting the most-quoted, of displaying the most-fetishized—is no longer voyeuristic pleasure but heightened self-consciousness.⁴⁷ This self-consciousness is confirmed in Tianqing's immediate lowering of his own gaze: a double admission of guilt, not only for *what he sees* but for the very *act of seeing*.⁴⁸

Judou's ritualistic staging of the “drama of desire”⁴⁹ had distinctly personal significance for both Zhang and Gong. Zhang had “discovered” Gong, then a 22-year-old junior at Beijing's Central Drama Academy, while he was casting the lead for his first film, *Red Sorghum*. According to Reynaud, Zhang interviewed scores of theatre students before meeting Gong. “He then spent three days *spying* on her while Gong, unaware, performed for their teacher.”⁵⁰ By the time they made *Judou* (their third film together), Gong had become Zhang's “leading lady,”

on and off the screen.⁵¹ However, while Zhang may still have been in the dominant position as director, Gong's stardom had begun to drastically alter the dynamics of their relationship. Zhang has admitted that, already at this early stage in Gong's career, it was *her* name attached to a project, not his, that facilitated a picture's financing.⁵² Thus, in *Judou*, while he may have chosen, for romantic or aesthetic reasons, to feature Gong's beauty and her “exquisite mixture of pain and sensuality” in any case, market forces made the choice that much more compelling.⁵³ Gong's character's “turning the tables” on Tianqing in the peeping scene, therefore, begs to be read as a recapitulation of the recent about-face in Zhang and Gong's power relations.

Carrying the analogy further, from the point that she “appropriates the gaze,” Judou—and Gong, as bankable star—is “calling the shots.” Having assumed control of her body, Judou henceforth determines the shot/reverse shot and point of view-editing strategies, as well as the narrative trajectory. She becomes the active partner in love (emerging “on top” in sexual relations) and attempted murder (repeatedly urging Tianqing to kill the fortuitously crippled Jinshan). The timid, infantilized Tianqing, himself crippled by ties to Confucian notions of filial piety, is unable to rid the couple of their oppressor, even when ideal conditions present themselves. This culturally specific aspect of Tianqing's passivity relates, as Lau reminds us, to the foundational Confucian conflict between Yin (excessive sexual feeling or action) and Xie (filial piety). “The biggest Sin of all sins is Yin and the greatest Virtue of all virtues is Xie,” is a familiar Chinese folk saying.⁵⁴ Tellingly, Tianqing is barely able to commit himself to Judou. She must seduce him, searching him out, egging him on. “What are you afraid of?” she implores, then taunts, “You really are a log!”

With Jinshan away from the mill, Judou finally makes her play. Eating lunch with Tianqing amidst the colored cloth and pounding mill machine, she suggestively sucks the tips of her chop sticks, takes a healthy bite of his long-stemmed radish, then wraps her arms around his bare chest. It was Tianqing's “looking through the hole” that started things, she reminds him. “You should have plugged it up,” he counters ambivalently. As he thrusts her down and starts to mount her, the focus shifts to the dyeing machine/cinematic apparatus. As if to “record” the incident, Judou kicks loose the brake notch holding the dyeing machine in place—and the machine starts to roll. Wheels spin, drive shafts pound, and a colored cloth strip whirls past Judou's writhing face, framing her in red and splattering her with dye/developer/(bodily fluids), before plunging into the dye vat/chemical soup.

The equation is clear: dyeing = filmmaking = sexual intercourse (figuratively, theoretically, and, in Zhang and Gong's case, literally). That the analogy is riven with ambivalence is evident from the above scene's, indeed the entire film's, conflict between visual tone and theme. James Verniere refers to the dye mill as a “vast instrument of torture...at the same time, the multi-colored banners are emblems of the fleeting joy and sexual passion the lovers secretly share.”⁵⁵ Russell Smith finds “majesty in the dye-mill setting,” as well as a symbol of a “rigid social system” which the sex act seeks to “disturb.”⁵⁶ Roger Ebert sees the film as “existing almost only for the eyes,” yet beneath the beauty and sensuous pleasure lies “the cruel reality of life.”⁵⁷ Chow explicitly acknowledges (with a nod to

Lacan's "mirror phase") the cinema/sex connection: "What is displayed is not so much woman or even feudal China per se as the act of displaying, of making visible. What Zhang 'fetishizes' is primarily cinematography itself...a repeated playing with 'the self' that is the visuality intrinsic to film."⁵⁸ If one couples Chow's "playing with the 'self'" with the intensely personal component I see operating in *Judou*, a hybrid notion emerges which I term "'self'-reflexivity." The quotation marks around "self" allow for a double inflection, relating both to the inner workings and outer manifestations of the film medium, as alluded to by Chow, as well as to this specific film's biographical associations with Zhang (and Gong).

"Self"-Reflexivity

Although the trope of the cinematic apparatus is its apotheosis, various technical devices reinforce the notion of film *qua* film in *Judou*. Recurring establishing shots of the peasant village, filmed with a long-focus lens, flatten space to the point of abstraction, foregrounding the screen's material two-dimensionality. A large number of slow dissolves are used, occasionally enhanced through step-frame slow motion; this technique signifies both strangeness and "estrangement" (in the Brechtian sense of *distanciation*), eliciting sensations of lyricism yet disruption on the one hand, associations of "artifice" and "surfaces" on the other. Chow relates Zhang's obsession with surfaces to Baudrillard's notion of "seduction." From the etymology of the word "seduction," intimating a leading astray or leading away, Baudrillard posits a seduction that "never belongs to reality, but only to artifice." Seduction, in this sense, is a kind of death, for "to seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion."⁵⁹

Seductive power thus resides in the power of the image, a "power" which, through "self"-reflexivity, permeates not only *Judou's* *mise-en-scène* but also its narrative. Beyond the acts of voyeurism and sex amid the dyeing machine/cinematic apparatus, both killings—first of the evil Jinshan, and later of Tianqing—result from drownings in the dye vat/developing tank. On the allegorical level, the bond between Tianqing and Zhang is based on more than physical resemblance. Tianqing is an orphan, who was adopted by Jinshan; Zhang was also "orphaned" (by his tainted political past) and "adopted" (by the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution). Jinshan's death doesn't emancipate Tianqing; tyranny is



Jinshan and his family, photographed.

restored under Tianqing's son, Tianbai. Similarly, Mao's death and replacement by Deng failed to bring an end to persecution, either for the politically stigmatized Zhang or for the Chinese people. Both Tianqing and Zhang, like the Chinese people as a whole, seem ever caught in a vice between the repressive regimes of old and new, past and present.

It might be assumed that for Zhang, at least, the financial rewards normally accruing to a successful filmmaker would have partly compensated for his political woes. The People's Republic, however, isn't "normal." Like all Chinese citizens, Zhang had to play by Chinese Communist rules. This meant no Western-style seven or even six-figure contracts, but a fixed salary—of less than \$100 per month.⁶⁰ As for "points," all profits went to the state.⁶¹ This may not have made Zhang a pauper by Chinese standards, for whom basic living expenses, including medical insurance, are subsidized, but it certainly reinforced his symbolic kinship with the economically exploited Tianqing.

What of Zhang's romantic liaison with Gong, one might ask? Surely this must have provided some respite from the gloom. Again, not entirely, in the culturally conservative People's Republic. In an extratextual reversal of the gender configuration in *Judou*, it is Zhang who was married during his affair with Gong. His estranged wife not only refused to divorce him, but her serialized accounts of her unfaithful husband's erotic escapade circulated in the tabloids.⁶² Scandal

sheets are one thing, moral censure another. For in the atheistic yet still deeply Confucianist People's Republic, an intimate relationship out of wedlock is not only frowned upon, but against the law.⁶³ Forced to live apart (as Tianqing and Judou must, also, following Jinshan's death), Zhang and Gong could only be together *during the making of their films*.⁶⁴ On the personal level, then, cinema was Zhang's only escape, albeit a partial and problematic one, as *Judou*'s highly ambivalent relation to the cinematic apparatus makes clear. On the political level, both the textual and extratextual couples' sexual frustration can be seen as reflecting the overall frustrations of a Communist society in which the demands of allegiance to political ends come before sexual fulfillment.⁶⁵

Near the end of *Judou*, a despairing Tianqing and Judou descend to the bottom of a dark, empty storage shaft. With its cylindrical shape and light-blocking cover, the shaft can be taken as another cinematic/sexual metaphor, of a long lens, or of the *camera obscura* itself—viewed (and experienced) from the *inside*, thus rendering it more vaginal than phallic. The dialogue reinforces the symbolic reversal. "Remember," says Tianqing, recalling how his affair with Judou began, "I watched through a hole in the wall." "And now," replies Judou, "we've gone into this *large hole*." It is as if our star-crossed lovers, in cinema as in life, have sought refuge deep within film's prime viewing (and recording) mechanism. Ultimately, of course, there is no escape, for blocking the shaft's entrance/aperture—and with it, the light—also blocks out the air. Retreating from the camera's gaze, and from the world, is as futile as bearing its frontal attack. If somewhat more romantic: Tianqing and Judou slowly asphyxiate, collapsing, Romeo and Juliet-like, into each other's arms.

Freud, not Shakespeare, has the final word in *Judou*. The troubled son, Tianbai, now a young adolescent, discovers his "parents" before they suffocate and hauls them out of the shaft, one by one. He spares his mother, dragging her up to the bedroom/theater to revive. He dumps his "father" into the dye vat/chemical soup, then smashes Tianqing's head with a wooden pole. The Oedipal trajectory could hardly be more explicit, nor could the "self"-reflexive metonymies. As Chow states, "The woman's body/sexuality becomes...the place where Oedipal rivalries—rivalries between men—are visually, visibly staged."⁶⁶ Zhang, ironically, by making the cinematic apparatus the battleground for personal and political rivalries, has "staged" his own death, and that of his "Generation." Tianqing's murder at the hands of the son who disowned him mirrors Zhang's, his *zhiqing* compatriots', and the Chinese people's repression by the Deng regime—a repression which had seen its most devastating expression, just months before the filming of *Judou*, in the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Zhang's reaction, in the end as in the beginning of *Judou*, is a chemical one. Following his stand-in character's dis-solution in the dye/developing liquid, Judou sets fire to the dye mill/cinema apparatus, apparently immolating herself in the process. This desperate act echoes an earlier failed attempt by Jinshan to burn down the mill, one of numerous narrative "repetitions" in *Judou*. Freud regarded repetition as "the essence of drive," which accorded the death wish (as the primal yearning to return to the source) its fundamental place beyond the pleasure principle.⁶⁷ Similarly, repetition's function in narrative, according to Stephen Heath, is "the return of the same in order to abolish the difficult time of desire." The

attempt is doomed, however, for rather than banishing or allaying desire, the ultimate effect of repetition is "the resurgence of inescapable difference...its edge, its final horizon, [which] is thus death."⁶⁸ This folding of desire into the seductive arms of death is clearly represented in Tianqing's and Judou's attempted suicide in the storage shaft/*camera obscura* interior, as it is in Judou's apparent self-immolation—"apparent" because her figure is shown *superimposed* among the flames, symbolically engulfed by them, not actually ignited. Judou/Gong's image "survives," in other words, just as film images "live on" in the viewer's consciousness once the film itself has "disappeared."

Conversely, however, the closing image of dancing flames is also "killed," through a freeze frame, as a children's song (heard twice before) plays on the track. The technical effects—superimposition; freeze frame; contrapuntal, non-diegetic music—are the film's final references to "itself." And a final ode to ambivalence: Fire connoting both life and death, desire and destruction; the children's singing signifying both hope for the future and, through the song's lyrics, a sardonic commentary on the ultimate ineffectuality of cinema in the face of man's inhumanity to (wo)man:

Hear the bell, ding dong,
Here we are at Village Wong.
So many dogs, here they come,
They bite us all but we can't run.
We can't run so we go home,
Play the horn, just for fun.

"Horn-playing," in Judou's "self"-reflexive scenario: one last allusion to the synthesis of the cinematic and the sexual, the personal and the political. The "fun," for Tianqing and Judou, as for Zhang and Gong: just another way "to live and dye in China."

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1 Sheila Cornelius, with Ian Haydn Smith, *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations*, New York, Wallflower, 2002, pp. 54-60. Although perhaps most consistently and dynamically displayed in Zhang's films, allegory is a defining characteristic of the Fifth Generation filmmakers generally. Indeed, according to Cornelius, allegory and symbolism are rudimentary to traditional Chinese cultural expression (*New Chinese Cinema*).

2 The credits for *Judou* list Yang Fengliang as co-director. He remains, however, an "invisible contributor," for nowhere in the research material examined for this essay is Yang named in regard to the film.

3 See John Caughey, ed., *Theories of Authorship*, New York, Routledge, 1981; Horace Newcomb and Robert C. Alley, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1983; Stephen Prince, *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction*, 2d edition, Needham Heights, Mass., Allyn & Bacon, 2001.

4 Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "A Cultural Interpretation of the Popular Cinema of China and Hong Kong," *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, Chris Berry, ed., London, British Film Institute, 1991, p. 133.

5 An early revision of auteurism, termed "auteur-structuralism," was posited by Peter Wollen in the early 1970s. While this attempt to "scientificize" the critical method was ultimately abandoned, it did lead to a shift in emphasis from a notion of the empirical author to that of the author as a construct of the reader (Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, New York, Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 107-11).

- 6 Tony Rayns, *The New Chinese Cinema: An Introduction*, London, Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 16.
- 7 Ye Tan, "From the Fifth to the Sixth Generation: An Interview with Zhang Yimou," *Film Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): p. 13. Cornelius, for example, demarcates the two pre-Communist era generations in the 1920s, not the 1930s (*New Chinese Cinema*, p. 35). Other possible etymological sources of the term "Fifth" Generation" include: (1) the call, during the Democracy Wall Movement of 1979, for a "Fifth Modernization" (democracy) to be added to Deng Xiaoping's officially proclaimed Four Modernizations (agriculture, industry, technology, and defense); and (2) the practice, in Communist-era Poland, of categorizing graduates of the Lodz Film School by generation; e.g., Wajda belonging to the first generation, Polanski to the second, Zanussi to the third, etc. (David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2d edition, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1990, p. 673).
- 8 Tan, "From the Fifth to the Sixth Generation," p. 2.
- 9 Rayns, *The New Chinese Cinema*, p. 16. Discourse surrounding the Fifth Generation led inevitably to the construction of a Sixth Generation, whose emergent auteurs include He Jianjun, Hu Xueyang, Lu Xuezhang, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Zhang Yuan. As opposed to the Fifth Generation tendency toward period settings, stylization, and allegory, Sixth Generation films tend to be set in contemporary China, to adopt documentary techniques, and to deal more explicitly with the hardships of urban living among disaffected urban youth and intellectuals (see Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema*; Kwok-kwan Tam and Wimal Dissanayake, *New Chinese Cinema*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 10 Berenice Reynaud, "On the Set with Zhang Yimou," *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 3 (July 1991): p. 27.
- 11 George Stephen Semsel, ed. *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1987, p. 73.
- 12 Berenice Reynaud, "Chen Kaige: The Shadows of the Revolution," *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 2 (February 1994): p. 30.
- 13 Esther Yau, "China," *World Cinema Since 1945*, William Luhr, ed., New York, Ungar, 1987, p. 131.
- 14 Zhou Chuanji, "Zhang Yimou, Master of Film Language," *Cinemaya* 30 (Autumn 1995): p. 114.
- 15 Quoted in Semsel, *Chinese Film*, p. 135.
- 16 See James Monaco, *The New Wave*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976; Chris Wiegand, *The French New Wave*, Harpendon, Pocket Essentials, 2001.
- 17 Lapsley and Westlake, *Film Theory*, pp. 105-9.
- 18 Other prominent Fifth Generation directors include Zhang Junzhao, Wu Zinou, and Zhou Xiaowen (see Tam and Dissanayake, *New Chinese Cinema*).
- 19 See Reynaud, "Chen Kaige."
- 20 Andy Klein, "Peking and Hollywood blend in 'Sorghum,'" *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, October 21, 1988, p. A9.
- 21 Nancy Spiller, "China tries to pull Oscar-nominated film," *Boston Herald*, March 9, 1991, p. F8.
- 22 Quoted in Reynaud, "Chen Kaige," p. 28.
- 23 Tony Rayns, "Propositions and Questions: Relating to an Instinctively Rebellious Filmmaker with Chinese Characteristics: Salutes to Zhang Yimou," *Cinemaya* 30 (Autumn 1995): p. 124.
- 24 "The Big Parade" Spotlight on Directors: The Asian Pacific Festival's First Ten Years." Program notes excerpted from *The New York Times Film Reviews*, Film Department of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996.
- 25 Rayns, "Propositions," p. 123.
- 26 Reynaud, "On the Set," p. 27.
- 27 Chris Berry, "Calm in the Eye of the Storm: Salutes to Zhang Yimou," *Cinemaya* 30 (Autumn 1995): p. 116.
- 28 Rayns, "Propositions," p. 124.
- 29 Kevin Thomas, "He's Trying Humor—Really," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2002, "Calendar," pp. 18, 20. A Western wrinkle was added to Zhang's reception problems in 1999. After the Chinese government had twice prohibited films of his from competing in the Cannes Film Festival, Zhang himself pulled *Not One Less* from competition when a screening committee called it propaganda (Maggie Farley, "'One Less' Movie at Cannes," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1999, p. F1). Zhang got a measure of revenge when subsequently the film was welcomed, and won a prize, at the Venice Film Festival.
- 30 Rayns, "Propositions," p. 124.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Semsel, *Chinese Film*, p. 138.
- 33 Reynaud, "On the Set," p. 16.
- 34 Quoted in David Holley, "China's Village Voice: Director Tries to Depict Peasant Life Without Riling Censors," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1992, pp. C10-11.
- 35 Reynaud, "Chen Kaige," p. 50.
- 36 Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 148.
- 37 Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier" (Excerpts), *The Film Studies Reader*, Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, and Mark Jancovich, eds., London, Arnold, 2000, pp. 213-18.
- 38 Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Reader*, Philip Rosen, ed., New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 286-98.
- 39 Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier" (Excerpts), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, Philip Rosen, ed., New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 244-78.
- 40 Rayns, "Propositions," p. 127.
- 41 Roger Ebert, "'Raise the Red Lantern': Review," *Chicago Sun Times*, March 27, 1992: E6.
- 42 Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," 1986, p. 273.
- 43 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, Bill Nichols, ed., Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 303-15.
- 44 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," pp. 304, 314. For more on New Chinese Cinema representations of women as objects of narrative change and as participants in the formal structuring of the voyeuristic gaze, see Esther Yau, "Cultural and Economic Dislocations: Filmic Fantasies of Chinese Women in the 1980s," *Wide Angle* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1989): p. 11.
- 45 W. A. Callahan, "Gender, Ideology, Nation: *Judou* in the Cultural Politics of China," *East-West Journal* 7, no. 1 (January 1993): p. 55.
- 46 Lau, "A Cultural Interpretation," p. 3.
- 47 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, p. 167.
- 48 Cornelius also sees Zhang's historical "discovery" of Gong as prefiguring the voyeuristic scene in *Judou* (*New Chinese Cinema*, p. 79).
- 49 Tam and Dissanayake, *New Chinese Cinema*, p. 23.
- 50 Berenice Reynaud, "Gong Li: The Glamour of the Chinese Star," *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 8 (August 1993): pp. 12-15, emphasis added.
- 51 Scarlet Cheng, "'Judou' & the Cultural Clampdown: Up for Best Foreign Film, but Banned in China," *Washington [D.C.] Post*, March 24, 1991, p. G1.
- 52 Havis, "The Selling of Zhang Yimou," p. 130.
- 53 Reynaud, "Gong Li," p. 12. In Zhang and Gong's fifth film together, *The Story of Qi Ju*, Gong plays a decidedly unglamorous, quite pregnant heroine. This departure from her familiar star persona did not sit well with mass audiences in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong, where some complained "she looked ugly" (Richard James Havis, "The Selling of Zhang Yimou: Marketing Chinese Images: Salutes to Zhang Yimou," *Cinemaya* 30 [Autumn 1995]: p. 130). By the 1990s, Gong's place in the popular Chinese imaginary had risen to the point that, according to James Dalrymple, she had replaced Mao as a cultural icon ("Republic Enemy No. 1," [London] *Daily Telegraph*, January 7, 1995, p. 16). For more on Gong's overall acting career, see Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema*, pp. 78-85.
- 54 Lau, "A Cultural Interpretation," p. 134.
- 55 Esther Verniere, "'Judou' a bleak, riveting film noir," *Boston Herald*, March 22, 1991, p. F11.
- 56 Russell Smith, "'Judou': Review," *Dallas Morning News*, March 22, 1991, p. G6.
- 57 Ebert, "'Raise the Red Lantern,'" p. E7.
- 58 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, p. 149.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Rayns, *The New Chinese Cinema*, p. 124. Linda Mathews puts the figure at an abysmal \$27 per month, although this was padded by a \$2,700 bonus Zhang received as his share of *Red Sorghum*'s Berlin Film Festival prize ("The Gang of One Who Altered China's Film Image," *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1988, pp. C10-11).
- 61 Stephen Schaefer, "Director learns to deal with China's customs," *Boston Herald*, June 4, 1993, p. E12.
- 62 The mourning scene in which Tianqing and Judou must throw themselves repeatedly to the ground in front of Jinshan's funeral procession, while prescribed by tradition as a demonstration of grief (Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema*, p. 88), serves diegetically as well as metaphorically, in relation to Zhang and Gong's illicit affair, as a sign of public humiliation.
- 63 Schaefer, "Director learns," p. E12.
- 64 Zhang was finally divorced from his first wife in 1993, after which he married Gong (David Armstrong, "Director's first film a big hit," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 1988, p. F1). Their romantic relationship ended during the filming of *Shanghai Triad*, although their parting was apparently amicable and they continued to work together (Selma Adams, "'Shanghai Triad': Review," *New York Post*, September 29, 1995, p. C3).
- 65 Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema*, p. 4.
- 66 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, p. 147.
- 67 Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, p. 124.
- 68 Ibid.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Jia Zhangke

by Shelly Kraicer

With his second feature film *Platform* [Zhantai, 2000], Chinese director Jia Zhangke established himself as the leading filmmaker of his generation in the People's Republic of China. Born in 1970 in a small town in Shanxi Province, Jia attended the literature department of the prestigious Beijing Film Academy (training ground for Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers who achieved international success in the late 1980s and 1990s). After a prize-winning short film, *Xiao Shan/Going Home* (1996), Jia directed his first feature *Xiao Wu* (1997), which won a clutch of prizes on the festival circuit (Vancouver, Nantes, Berlin, Pusan). Set in FenYang, the ultra-low budget film follows the story of a desultory pickpocket whose half-hearted attempts at friendship, petty thievery, and romance all lead nowhere, absolutely nowhere. He is shown, in the film's striking final image, humiliated, squatting on the ground while chained by the town's head cop to a pole in the main square, as the townspeople gather round to peer, curious and bemused.

Xiao Wu heralded the arrival of a major new voice among China's "sixth generation" of filmmakers, who began their careers after the June 4, 1989 protest movement (they include Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and He Jianjun). Shunning the lushly photographed rural past of the famed "fifth generation" (Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang et al.), these younger filmmakers seek to depict a rougher, more gritty reality. Using low budgets, they film typically urban stories of alienated youth independently of the major Chinese film studios, and outside the official purview of government surveillance. These "underground," unauthorized films have never sought, and never received, official permission to film or to screen in their own country.

Platform, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2000 and subsequently screened at festivals around the world, achieved unprecedented critical and commercial success. Heralded by Chinese and western critics as one of the greatest Chinese films of the century, it even managed to secure a limited commercial release in Canada, as well in Europe and Japan, whose distribution systems are much more friendly to Chinese art films. At 195 minutes long (later cut down for commercial release to 155 minutes), *Platform* announces its ambition with its near-epic proportions. But it is a uniquely miniature epic,

examining changes in the daily lives of four members of a troupe of performers during the first decade of China's opening up to the west (the Deng Xiaoping era), from 1979 to 1991.

Starting out as a post-Maoist propaganda band, the troupe privatizes in the mid-1980s and quickly morphs into a shrill, unconvincingly glossy simulacrum of what to rural Chinese eyes might constitute a pop group, the self-styled "All-Stars Rock'n Breakdance Electronic Band". As contemporary music, hairstyles, clothes, and fashions seep into China (and into Jia's camera range), we watch the troupe's members, especially harmonica player turned punk guitarist Cui Mingliang and dancer Yin Ruijuan try to struggle with social change more revolutionary than Mao's. *Platform* is also an extended love story, of sorts: Mingliang and Ruijuan start out in something like a relationship, which falls apart as he goes on the road with the band and she stays home. On his return, years later, they find each other, again.

Jia Zhangke keeps his focus purely local, and his resolution precisely fine-grained. Historical change is alluded to, implied by off screen events, suggested by telling absences. His characters' inchoate, barely expressible yearnings stay in the foreground; as they find themselves with more and more "freedom", their happiness grows more and more elusive, sometimes visible, off in the distance or the imagination, always just out of reach. In the words of the 1980s hit song *Zhantai* that give the film its Chinese title:

The long and empty platform
The wait seems never-ending
The long wagons are carrying my short-lived love
The long and empty platform
Lonely, we can only wait
All my love is out-bound
Nothing on the in-bound train
My heart waits, waits forever.



Platform



The following article is assembled from material gathered during two conversations I had with Jia Zhangke, the first at the 2000 Toronto International Film Festival, and the second, accompanied by Peter Rist, at the 2001 Hong Kong International Film Festival. I'd like to thank Professor Rist for his collaboration in Hong Kong, translators Maria Luo and Cynthia Wu Yue for their generous assistance in making both interviews possible, and to Anna Roosen-Runge for transcribing the text.

SK – The film's title *Zhantai*, which means "platform" in English, comes from a song heard during the film. Could "platform" also suggest a place where people wait for change to happen, for a journey to begin, or where they arrive after a journey ends?

J – Before the mid-eighties all the songs we heard in China were propaganda, revolutionary songs. All of a sudden in the eighties, rock'n'roll was being written in China. This is the meaning that the song *Zhantai* has for people. It inspired me when I was thinking about the script. It is a love song, but the lyrics are also about expectation. Right after going through the Cultural Revolution of the sixties and the seventies, people were repressed. Both the Chinese people and the government had certain expectations in the eighties. The government said "in the future everything will be better, everything will be fine." My film shows that particular anticipation, those expectations. "Platform" also means the starting point; it is also your destination. Many Chinese believe in fate, so everyone might have a pre-destination.

SK – What is the status of *Platform* in China? Was it shot with-

out official approval?

J – Yes. This film was in development for a long time. In 1998 I found a Japanese producer and talked to many film production companies, official ones in China, but I wasn't successful. Finally I couldn't wait any more so I decided to go ahead and shoot.

SK – Were there any problems shooting in China?

J – Every day during the shoot, the producer and I felt that something might happen. But there was no interference from the government. The film took about a year to shoot, since there were scenes set in three different seasons. All together, there were 70 days of shooting. I don't have a very calm attitude towards shooting, which puts a lot of pressure on us. It was a real thrill to be shooting this way: both the cinematographer [Yu Lik-wai] and I were happy that we could feel so courageous on location.

SK – Your choice of a protagonist like Cui Mingliang is interesting: he is not a character with whom an audience could easily identify. He is extraordinarily passive, he is not particularly attractive or charismatic, and he rarely speaks at length. In fact, he is practically inarticulate. Why centre the story on him, and why cast Wang Hongwei in the role?

J – It is very simple. Wang Hongwei's image is very plain, Chinese, common. If he happened to be around you wouldn't even notice him. He is just one of us. There is nothing special about him. I wanted to show an ordinary person who is just like anyone in China. It is the social environment that created people like these characters in *Platform*. They have a comparatively weak position in society. They are weak because they have taken on responsibilities in life, for which they have had to make sacrifices. I really respect this group. I want to show the strength people have to move on in life, and this is what Cui Mingliang does: he moves on.

SK – We've seen the actor Wang Hongwei as the lead of your first film *Xiao Wu*. Are *Platform*'s other actors professionals? How

did you choose them?

J – Of *Platform*'s four principal roles, three were easy to cast. You mentioned one, Wang Hongwei. Another, Liang Jingdong [Zhang Jun, the long-haired guitarist and Mingliang's best friend] is an art designer whom I found. The third, actress Yang Tianyi [Zhong Ping, a singer and dancer and Zhang Jun's girlfriend], is both a documentary director and an actor working for the military. The most difficult role to cast was Yin Ruijuan [Wang Hongwei's sometime girlfriend and the troupe's main dancer]. I advertised in Beijing newspapers and finally found Zhao Tao at Shanxi University. She is a professional dancer. She studied Chinese folk dance when she was very young, and from 1990 to 1998 taught dance at the university.

SK – I'd like to ask you about some of the materials that you have incorporated into the film: the poems and songs from the 1980s that embed *Platform* so specifically into a dense field of cultural and social detail. First of all, the poem "Fengliu" that Yin Ruijuan recites early in the film, at the performance troupe's rehearsal.

J – It was a poem that was very popular during the 1970s. The word *fengliu* can mean either "flirting" or "romance", something in between the two. It was one of those very trendy poems that reminds people of that time. It was in fact an official poem created by certain [officially sanctioned] writers. At that time, young people had rather rebellious thoughts. They did not really like to listen to preaching, the old same thing again and again. So the poem was a new way of preaching a certain message, reshaped into an art form. It is a form of education on moral values for young people.

SK – So it is more acceptable than the rebellious thoughts but it is less boring than the official ideology?

J – Exactly.

SK – Zhong Ping, the second female lead, sings three or four songs from a songbook, in a lovely, intimate scene. What are they?

J – It was quite a popular songbook for young people at that time, one that they used to practice singing.

SK – They are no longer official songs, party line stuff?

J – Not at all. Most of them are love songs or pop songs for young people. Nothing to do with the government. The context is after 1978, when Deng Xiaoping opened up China.

SK – And the "Gen- Gen- Gen-ghis Khan" song, that features so prominently twice in the film?

J – It was from Hong Kong, sung by George Lam. It was one of the most popular hits in discotheques in China in 1983 or 1984. Most young people liked to hear it. But I was really young then, only 13 years old.

SK – The film's political content seems to seep in through sounds from off-screen, for the most part. Through radio broadcasts, songs, public address announcements and other noises. Your use of off-screen sounds is fascinating, one of the most important innovations of the film. Could you talk a bit about the relationship between off-screen sound, off-screen space, and what we see onscreen? For example, the second scene, in which the troupe departs in their bus, there is sound but almost complete darkness.

J – At the beginning of the film, I wanted to describe a kind of mood, a feeling of people getting lost, not knowing where to go. So as the bus was leaving, suddenly it became dark. The audience could then concentrate on the sound. Driving into the darkness gives the film a rather heavy tone, here, which

the audience should sense. The sound design is in fact very deliberate. It brings back my memories of that time.

I think that people can generate certain conclusions about where the sounds come from. For example, if you hear the military drilling you are sure there is an army beside you, or somewhere around. If you hear a bus station announcement, you can figure out where you are. But sometimes this would be easier for a Chinese audience with a background similar to mine. Maybe it's a little bit strange for a foreign audience.

One aspect of my memories, the atmosphere of sounds, creates the entire atmosphere of the film. As I was shooting the film, certain sounds and music would sometimes remind me of certain scenes. For example, I remember the sound of the loud speaker that broadcast announcements in the town. It is all connected back to my memory. So you could say it is a source of my creativity.

SK – One of *Platform*'s themes, both explicitly and implicitly, is time. How did you design the film's chronology and pace?

J – I chose to have no parallel chronologies, but to proceed linearly, just to tell the story in a single line. I want to focus on what is happening, one thing at a time. As for the pace of the film, I had two choices. One is fast-paced, clear cut, dramatic: it's good for the audience since it's easier to understand. But I chose to use a slower pace because I feel that it better reflects reality. People living their daily lives don't really know what is going on the outside world. Though their lives may be full of changes, the rate of change is very slow. This pace may be challenging, though, for a film audience to understand or to accept.

SK – Stylistically, your film relies on long takes and a relatively immobile camera positioned quite far from the characters. You leave many gaps in the story, creating a narrative marked by frequent ellipsis. Would you encourage a viewer to find any connections between your style and recent Taiwanese cinema – I'm thinking of Hou Hsiao-Hsien in particular—whose use of similar techniques has been so influential?

J – I would say that I am not exactly influenced by Hou Hsiao-Hsien. But there might be similarities because as Chinese, our perspective on life is sometimes very similar. I really admire Hou Hsiao-Hsien's earlier films, and in particular I like one thing that Hou has said: "How you shoot is how you live".

SK – What does this saying mean for you?

J – *Platform* shows an attitude towards life that is more objective. I try to be very objective, to be fair in how I lead my life.

SK – You filmed the great majority of *Platform*'s scenes in one single shot. Talk about how and why the long take appeals to you.

J – I use long takes to express my desire to describe the uniqueness, the unity, and the singularity of the time and space. I also use it to express the theme of the film: peoples' desire in expectation of something. In that sense, what I am trying to describe in the film is the constant struggle between people and time. If the struggle is disrupted, if it is interrupted, for example, by the use of several shots, then that atmosphere would be broken.

SK – When you talk about struggle between people and time, do you see it as a tragic relationship? Are people in your movies (and in China) trapped or limited by time, or are they lost, unable to understand time and change? A long take can

create incredible tension in an audience: you realize it's happening, and you wait and wait for the cut, but the shot seems like it will never end.

J – That's right. I tried to create a kind of tension. When you are waiting, watching someone onscreen for quite a long time, you feel something like expectation. I want to portray people who are waiting for something that is going to happen, maybe today or tomorrow. But it never happens. Everyday time is always the same. It goes on and on; there isn't much difference between today and tomorrow. In this way, it is like the structure of life in China. Chinese people might want miracles to happen in the future, but today, life is just plain and boring.

SK – A film like *Platform* that takes place over ten years might have epic, historically critical aspirations. Chinese films like Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite*, for example, try to encapsulate, to redefine the country's history, and can even function as political manifestos. How do you balance your filmmaking between the personal and the political: how does autobiography, or recreation of personal experience, the nostalgia of reminiscence, connect with political statements in your cinema?

J – *Platform* is personal, more a personal film experience than anything political. From the 1980s to the 1990s, as I grew from 10 to 20 years old, China has undergone radical changes. Prior to that there were very few film directors who were able to express something personally. Because this was an independent production, I was free to personalize the film the way I wanted. But on the other hand, China has a very strong political environment, so I can't really avoid having any political scenes in the film.

SK – For example?

J – *Platform* depicts a process of self-liberation. In an earlier period in China [before the opening scene of the film, set in 1979], everybody was part of the collective. There was no privacy, even when you were in love. You had to report all aspects of your private life, which made you lose self-esteem in a way. Now, during the 1980s, the Chinese people could begin the process of looking for freedom or liberation.

SK – Which is interesting, because if you look at the general thematic flow of the film, you see what is ostensibly certain progress from Maoist collective control to individual freedom, liberty, western style liberalism. But at the same time, the characters in the film are becoming more and more unhappy. They lose love; they lose their jobs; they lose their dignity.

J – That's right. It is a process of looking for yourself, for the ego. It is at the same time a process that alienates people. For example Cui Mingliang was someone with social respect and social status. He was a central person in the art troupe, but after ten years he lost his job and his importance. So he gained freedom, but there is always something else that accompanies this. You have to pay for every movement you make towards freedom. It's complicated, and the complexity is unavoidable. It is not something that I can describe completely clearly.

SK – The second half of the film seemed to show actions more on the surface, more sketchily, with less explanation.

J – Yes. Towards the end of the film, there is more and more description of the state of people's lives, rather than an attempt to dig at their meaning. This was my choice: I intended to describe the superficial aspects rather than discover what lies underneath. There is no connection between many of the succeeding shots. I tried my best to describe, not to interpret

the characters. There is something about them that I could not explain very well. I care more about the state of their lives: how there is an absence of connection, and how time flies. I tried not to use the traditional method of plotting, of setting up events. The style serves to describe absurdity.

SK – Could you talk about the penultimate scene [which became the final scene, in the shortened version of *Platform* released commercially]. It comes as quite a surprise to see that Cui Mingliang has finally married his presumably lost love Yin Ruijuan, and that they have a child.

J – It is a position of compromise for both Mingliang and for Ruijuan. They surrender, and accept this situation for the rest of their lives. They want to go on but they can't.

SK – The last scene [now cut from the shortened version] is mysterious, deliberately so. A group of people, including most of the main characters, stands in a field. They watch silently as an unknown man raises a rifle and fires into the sky. There is no unambiguous way to read this. Do you want to say anything more about it, or did you want to leave the mystery to the audience?

J – The last scene is supposed to be an abstract scene, subject to the interpretation of the audience. Before the last scene I was trying to be very truthful to reality, to be objective. I feel I have put a lot that is personal into the film. The last scene is almost like a sigh of emotion, of feeling. The people in the background are looking into the sky, still hoping and still expecting. It is something like a motivation for people to move on.

SK – Is there anything that no one has asked you yet about the film, that you wish would come up in an interview?

J – [laughs] There is one thing that no one has asked, but which I think is very important. When I was shooting this second film, my attitude and mentality were very different from when I was shooting *Xiao Wu*. While shooting *Platform*, I became very irrational, very absorbed.

SK – In what way?

J – There are two scenes. In one, the two dancers are dancing by the Yellow River on top of the truck, and in the other, Yin Ruijuan dances at her workplace. I became completely involved and totally lost myself. Among all the shorts and features I've worked on, I've never before become so immersed, so involved in my own emotions.

SK – Was it difficult to finish *Platform* and move on to your next film?

J – If I couldn't stop the emotions, I couldn't start the next film. So I've already closed that chapter. The next project could be another large scaled film, but it will still be about the ordinary people and the reality of China. It will also be in set in Shanxi, where I was born. It is going to be about a person trying to find a job, to survive nowadays. There is some humour in his way of life.

SK – So you are not attracted to the idea of filming an urban movie, set in a large city? Other sixth generation directors are preoccupied with depicting life in Beijing or Shanghai.

J – That is not yet my interest, so it is hard to say. I have lots of stories to tell from my own experience in my hometown. I want to tell those first.

Shelly Kraicer is the editor of the Chinese Cinema Digest. While based in Toronto, he has focused on programming and writing about Chinese-language films, and will be spending the next year in Beijing.



Three Japanese Actresses of the 1950s

MODERNITY, FEMININITY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

by Catherine Russell

Japan in the 1950s was a period of accelerated social transformation as a new generation came of age in the wake of the seven-year American occupation. The so-called "golden age" of Japanese cinema corresponds to a time when a national culture had to be reinvented that would be both "democratic" and "Japanese." Among the contradictions of this cultural moment was the definition of the feminine. Although the Occupation brought with it the legislation of women's rights, resistance to "women's liberation" was implicitly linked to the protection of traditional values. Analysis of the star-images of female movie stars of the 1950s is a means of tracking the negotiation of gender roles through this contradictory period. Three of the most popular actresses of the time, Hara Setsuko, Takamine Hideko, and Sugimura Haruko, were identified strongly with the *gendai geki*, or films with contemporary settings, through which their star-images were linked to the discourse of everyday life. These three women represent a range of acting styles which, I will argue, correspond not only to different "images of women", but also to different subject-positions for women within postwar narrative cinema.

Of course there are many other important female stars in the 1950s, including Tanaka Kinuyo, who also directed six films; and Kyo Machiko and Yamada Isuzu, actresses who exemplified the physiognomy of the classical beauty. Kyo, who starred in both *Rashomon* (1950) and *Ugetsu* (1953), may have



Mifune Toshiro, Hara Setsuko, Mori Masayuki and Kuga Yoshiko in *The Idiot*



Kyo Machiko in *Older Brother Younger Sister* (Naruse, 1953)

become the emblematic “traditional” woman for foreign audiences, but in Japan Kyo represented a new sensual carnality. The characters she plays in Mizoguchi’s *Street of Shame* (1956) and Naruse’s *Older Brother Younger Sister* (1953), for example, are defined by an aggressive sexuality, and her physical appeal was particularly titillating to Japanese male audiences for whom her image was linked to the freedoms of American democracy. Certainly the culture of burlesque and striptease that flourished in the postwar period promoted a confused notion of “women’s liberation” as a liberation of the flesh. As Joanne Izbicki notes, the subject of this liberation was the male audience, amplified and stimulated by the American G.I.s, while female subjectivity was sublimated to the objectified body of the female dancer. The only freedoms for women within this display of sexuality were employment opportunities for performers and cash prizes offered by the plethora of beauty contests.¹

For the male critic Saburo Kawamoto, Kyo’s appeal lay in part in her transgression of the norms of Japanese femininity—her adoption of an American-style openness about sexuality.² Indeed, there is a deep ambivalence about the “Japaneseness” of the top stars of this period. Both Hara Setsuko and Mifune Toshiro had slightly Caucasian features, suggesting that their star-images might have been linked to new notions of physical appeal within a global culture. Their popularity in fact complicates any kind of absolute Japanese/Western duality once we consider them within a framework of Japanese modernity, and I would argue that the popular culture of 1950s Japan needs to be recognized, precisely, as a key site of modernity. As Harry Harootunian has pointed out with respect to the interwar period, modernity is a “specific cultural form and a consciousness of lived historical time that differs according to social forms and practices.”³ Japanese modernity differs from European modernity in that the transformation of everyday life was also an ongoing “encounter with the new that came from elsewhere.”⁴

If Kyo’s appeal lay in her transgression of the norms of Japanese femininity, the identity of the modern Japanese woman remains undefined, and arguably erased by the direct appeal to male audiences in Kyo’s star image. There is no question that women comprised a good portion of audiences of the period, many of them new wage-earners in the postwar period. In numerous films of the Occupation and the years immediately following it, the ideology of the “good wife and wise mother” confronted the sexuality and independence that the Americans introduced to Japanese cinema. This period, referred to by some as “The Confusion Era” is one in which social mores and customs, and the very fabric of everyday life, underwent a rapid reinvention.⁵ I would like to suggest that the task of representing women fell to actresses whose popularity lay in their ability to embody traditional aesthetic and

moral values, while by virtue of being film stars, becoming models of independent career women. The star image, which encompasses film roles, publicity and the larger discursive scope of a given performer’s career, is a valuable method of cultural analysis. As Richard Dyer has argued, “star images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek to ‘manage’ or resolve.”⁶

Japan in the late 1920s and early 30s saw the emergence of the *moga* or “modern girl,” a figure that was especially prominent (and controversial) on the screen. Yamada Isuzu’s role in *Osaka Elegy* may be the most familiar instance of the *moga* to foreign audiences (although Hiba Sachiko in Naruse’s *Wife! Be Like a Rose!* [1935] was the first to be seen outside Japan). The *moga* dressed in Western fashions and exhibited a degree of mobility previously unknown to Japanese women, and as Miriam Silverberg notes, the extensive discourse that was produced at the time about the *moga* subsumed discussion of social change into the controversial and sensational image of the new Japanese woman.⁷ While this image disappeared during the rise of nationalist ideology and heavy censorship of the war years, it did not reappear intact in the postwar period. The construction of the feminine could no longer be contained or signified by a single—if complex—image such as the *moga*, but was divided over several generations of women, and several different orientations toward modernization and Westernization.

While Harootunian’s conception of Japanese modernity includes “the formation of new subject positions and gender and sexual identities,”⁸ he does not follow up on the significance of this cultural formation to Japanese women. Miriam Hansen has, however, made similar claims about Shanghai cinema in the 1930s, pointing out how the incorporation of American cultural forms into non-Western cinemas constitutes a “vernacular modernism” that can have progressive and positive effects on gender and sexual identities.⁹ Once we look closely at the Japanese cinema of the 1950s, it should be clear that these new gender roles involve a complex process of negotiating cultural values, especially given the range of acting styles and characters on the Japanese screen. While many actresses, including Takamine Hideko, played strongly sexual roles as Kyo Machiko did, others, such as Tanaka Kinuyo and Yamada Isuzu starred regularly in period films, and tended to exemplify the *feminisuto* ideals of beautiful suffering and endurance.¹⁰ Chika Kinoshita has analyzed Tanaka’s acting in the films she made with Mizoguchi, concluding that she participates in a complex “choreography of desire” with the camera, contributing to the spatial configurations of Mizoguchi’s distinctive style. The four characteristics she notes in Tanaka’s acting are “her smooth, prompt and light way of walking; fluid but restless gestures; inclination to avoid eye-contact; and ambiguity in facial expressions.”¹¹ These traits are of course

also features of polite behaviour, key aspects of the ideals of femininity embodied by the female impersonator.

It is important to realize that actresses in Japan from Meiji (1868-1912) into the 1950s, were effectively responsible for inventing the public persona of the Japanese woman. Actresses were banned from the stage near the beginning of the Tokugawa era (1600-1867), and the craft of the *onnagata* or female impersonator was devoted to depicting an idealized image of femininity, more perfect than any woman could hope to attain. Shima theatre began to include actresses in the 1880s in a "modern Japanese kabuki," while Shingeki theatre, more closely modelled on Western realist styles, emerged in the second decade of the 20th century. Sumako Matsui famously played Nora in a Japanese production of *The Doll's House* in 1911, for which she instantly became "the talk of Japan."¹² Because the character she played transgressed all the norms of polite feminine behaviour, the introduction of Japanese actresses into the psychological realism of Western drama was very much bound up with the emergence of female subjectivity in 20th century Japan. Matsui's performance of *Salome* in 1914 in fairly revealing costumes indicated to Japanese audiences and critics that the female body was a necessary component of the essential feminine performance, and the debate about actresses and *onnagata* shifted toward the former, as a new alignment of sex, gender and performance came into being in modern Japanese culture.¹³

In the postwar period, new concerns about the propriety of female performance were reasserted, especially in light of the new influx of American films. Two of the recommended subjects promoted by the Civil Information and Education division of SCAP in the 1940s were "kissing" and "women's liberation." Japanese actors and audiences were at first resistant to the open display of affection that the Americans associated with "democracy", partially because it blurred the boundary between public and private space.¹⁴ The conception of screen space as public space is key to understanding the dynamics of performance and subjective expression in Japanese cinema. Whereas the "women's liberation" films tended to be biopics of heroic suffragettes whose lives usually ended badly, I believe we have to look to the *shoshimin eiga*, or home-dramas about "ordinary people" where neither kissing nor liberation were taking place, but where a much more subtle and much more profound transformation in the representation of female subjectivity occurred, primarily after the arbitrary mandates of the Occupation authorities were removed in 1952. It is in these films that the private space of the home and the female homemaker was made public.

Costuming in the 1940s and 50s *shoshimin eiga* tends toward very plain and conservative dress, as opposed to the more stylish fashions of the early 1930s and the 1960s. Older women wear undecorated kimonos, and younger women wear a virtual uniform of white shirt and knee-length skirt. Dresses

tend only to be worn by women of ill-repute or questionable morals. The writer Yasunari Kawabata commented that "Japanese actresses are always expert at playing *mizu-shobai* roles [geisha, prostitutes, professional entertainers, etc.] but their playing of wives and young women is usually bad. It is because in real life, wives and young women hold back something in their emotions while *mizu-shobai* women show all."¹⁵ While Kawabata is very wrong about the quality of women's acting, he does point to a certain prejudice in Japanese culture against female expressivity, which is associated with immoral behaviour. In fact, some of the most impressive performances by women in Japanese cinema consist of a subtlety, containment and a "holding back."

During the war years the film industry had been answerable to military censors, so the post-occupation cinema followed over a decade of harsh restrictions and ideological imperatives. It is not surprising that this national cinema flowered in the 1950s. Moreover, the best films of the period combined elements of traditional Japanese culture and aesthetics, with some of the new principles of individualism introduced by the occupation. Women were thus caught between being symbolic of the harmonious beauty of the Japanese home-re-established after years of turmoil—and the opportunities opened up by the new culture of equality and human rights. The nascent women's movements of the 1950s were themselves divided into two camps, one advocating rights for female workers, and the other concerned with the status of motherhood and the family.¹⁶

Analysis of Japanese women film stars in the 1950s is one way of exploring how these contradictions were played out in the popular culture of the period. I would also like to suggest that from the historical and cultural distance that we now view these films, analysis of acting styles and star images may also help to highlight the gendered dynamics of "Japaneseness" in this national cinema. By comparing acting styles and star-images, moreover, I hope to indicate how the contradictions of Japanese modernity are evident within the regime of film performance. The acting styles and careers of three of these stars are particularly interesting because of the contradictions implicit in their double roles as career women and female icons. And, taken together, these three tend to suggest the diversity of positions represented even within the realist aesthetic of the *shoshimin eiga*.

Hara Setsuko, Takamine Hideko and Sugimura Haruko all had very long careers, but each of them peaked in the 1950s when Takamine was in her 20s, Hara was in her 30s and Sugimura was in her 40s. A new generation of actresses was also emerging in the 1950s (including Misora Hibari, Wakao Ayako and Okada Mariko), and more than a few films involved confrontations between older and younger female characters representing very different sets of values. However, Hara and Takamine were among the top stars of the period, and the average age of the actresses listed by Anderson and Richie in their



Higashiyama Chieko and Hara Setsuko in *Tokyo Story*



1959 survey of "representative stars" is 37.¹⁷ Among the debates of the period was a comparison of the "well-proportioned" beauty of some of the older stars, compared to the sexiness of the younger stars who were declared to be "not beautiful" but "pretty."¹⁸

I want to suggest in this paper that different readings of stars such as Hara, Takamine and Sugimura are available to contemporary viewers, and may have been equally available to viewers in the 1950s. In other words, I want to propose a means of reading "against the grain" of the domestic melodrama such as *Tokyo Story* (Ozu, 1953) as a means of challenging the conventional passivity of the Japanese woman. Indeed, I will argue that classical aesthetic codes of beauty and form are not only projected onto the Japanese actress, but through codes of "polite performance," become techniques of inscribing norms of social behaviour. While my analysis of Japanese acting is unquestionably "cross-cultural," the imposition of a feminist gaze is produced by the historical difference/distance that also pertains between contemporary Japanese viewers, and the films produced in the 1950s. Japanese film studies' preoccupation with form has tended to overlook the contradictions of this period which can now be reviewed and re-assessed from new perspectives. A better understanding of the acting styles and star system of the period is only one way of gaining such a perspective.

HARA SETSUKO The Eternal Virgin

Best known for her performances in Ozu Yasujiro's films, Hara Setsuko was known in Japan as "the eternal virgin." When she retired in 1963, shortly after Ozu's death, there was a public outcry, and her disappearance at age 43 was the cause of great resentment, especially as it ran so contrary to the efforts of the characters she played never to disappoint.¹⁹ The epithet "eternal virgin" evokes a certain independence from the family system, and from a social system organized around men.²⁰ It also, however, evokes a standard of beauty that the actress may have been hesitant to challenge by aging in public. Women's magazines in the 1950s were obsessed with the question of Hara's marriage.²¹ At the age of 37 she declared that no one would marry her, despite the rumours. One writer described Hara's plight as "a tragedy of the system of the Japanese film industry that stars have to retire if they get married." Hara was portrayed as being torn between a "natural" desire to be a good wife and mother, and her responsibilities to her large dependent family (including an older brother-in-law who had been purged after the war)²² and to her fans.²³

Although Hara acted in six films by Ozu, she also performed in films by many other directors, including Kurosawa, Kinoshita and Naruse. Kurosawa's *No Regrets for our Youth* is her most exuberant and expressive performance, in keeping with the "democratic" themes of this 1946 film. Her performance was roundly criticized by the Japanese press, who described it as hysterical, eccentric, abnormal and monstrous.²⁴ She also plays a demonic femme fatale in Kurosawa's *The Idiot* (1951), for which she was again chastised for overacting—but it is more a matter of her being cast against type that was not accepted.²⁵ For Naruse and Ozu she gave far more restrained performances, starting with her first Ozu film in 1949, *Late Spring*. Along with Ryu Chishu, she became a quintessential Ozu actor, which meant, in part, reducing action and movement to a minimum. Within Ozu's rigorous formal system, actors are completely contained and constrained by architecture as well as the systems of patterned montage and graphic matching that determine the *mise-en-scène*. David Bordwell points out that despite these limitations, actors "could achieve nuances which a less rigorous system could not sustain."²⁶

Unlike Bordwell, I prefer to read Ozu's rigour as being emblematic of a repressive and controlling social system. While the harmony and balance of his *mise-en-scène* is drawn from traditional Japanese aesthetics, the conservatism has often been misread as radical modernism.²⁷ Hara Setsuko, as Ozu's prototypical actress, demonstrates the way that this contradiction is predicated on certain effects of gender. In almost every film Hara made with Ozu, she plays an unmarried woman whose arranged marriage is a central plot element. One important effect of this repetition of characters and plots from one Ozu film to another is that Hara's character never actually gets mar-

Hara Setsuko in *Tokyo Story* (Ozu, 1953)





ried. The term "eternal virgin" thus evokes the sense of her being perpetually on a threshold of womanhood. The other distinctive feature of her performances in Ozu's films is her mask-like smile that serves to hide her characters' emotions, while fixing her image onto the static compositions of Ozu's *mise-en-scène*. Her smile may be read in some instances as a subversive disturbance of the formal rigour of these films, as if she is in possession of some kind of secret.

Very occasionally Ozu allows Hara to release some of the pent-up emotions of her characters. In *Early Summer* (1951) she plays a scene with Awashima Chikage in which she almost admits that she may be in love with a certain suitor. The two women abruptly rise from the *tatami* and playfully run around the table, although Ozu's tight low-angle framing depicts the two women as monstrous schoolgirls whose movements are stiffly formal, as though their game were a ritual performance of girlishness. In the last scene of this film, when Hara/Noriko's love-marriage is finally okayed by her parents, instead of the arrangement that they had initiated, and Hara is about to move from the family home to distant Hokkaido she runs from the family table and up to her room, where she bursts into tears. Ozu cuts away from her display of emotion to a shot of the landscape outside the window. The music rises, and the film ends with this transcendent transformation of her confused emotions into an image of beautiful contentment. In her later films with Ozu, such as *The End of Summer* (1961), Hara's character is denied even this degree of expressivity, resigned to her place within the family. The suggestion of a potential suitor brings about only a slightly pained expression on her face, which is otherwise illegible.

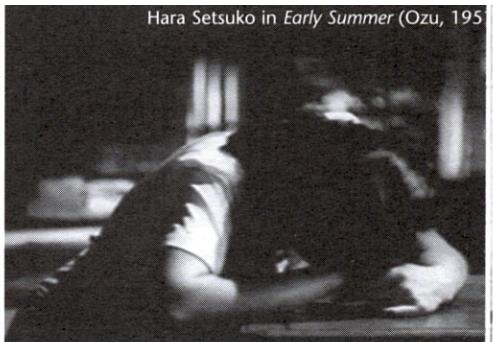
Hara also made four films with Naruse Mikio between 1951 and 1960, a director whose style is similar to Ozu's but who is also much more down to earth in his refusal of any transcendental aesthetic formalism. In each of the films she made with Naruse, Hara plays a married woman who learns to reconcile herself with the dissatisfactions of married life. Her characters struggle to fit in with social expectations and regulations. In *Meshi* (*Repast* 1951), Hara plays a childless housewife whose husband (played by Uehara Ken) starts paying more attention to a wayward niece who has come to visit the couple in Osaka. The emotional turbulence of Hara's character Michiyo is depicted by Naruse not through dialogue, but by eyelines and cutting. When Hara learns that her husband's niece has not only been flirting with her husband, but has also gone out with a man who Hara herself has become attracted to since learning of her husband's disloyalties, she says nothing to the girl. Instead she turns away, and sitting on the step to the garden, breaks out into laughter. Fade out to a new scene. (The niece is played by Shimazaki Yukiko, who would be one of the first Japanese actresses to perform nude in a "sun-tribe film" by Yamamoto Satsuo called *To the End of the Sun* in 1954.)

The other key film that Hara made with Naruse is *Yama no oto* (*Sound of the Mountain*, 1954), based on a Kawabata novel. Here she plays another childless housewife whose husband (played

again by Uehara) has an affair. The emotional crux of this film lies in the relationship between Hara's character and her father-in-law (Yamamura So), who is sympathetic to her suffering but incapable of controlling his irresponsible son. Naruse orchestrates a complex rhythm of glances and cut-aways to depict the emotional complexity of the relationships, and also sets the scenes played between Hara and Yamamura in natural settings such as parks and the landscape of Kamakura. The suggested harmony between these two characters is greatly lacking from the husband-and-wife relationship. In Naruse's films Hara's characters achieve a far more nuanced depth of feeling than she is able to achieve with Ozu, although her performances are still much more restrained than the exuberance of *No Regrets*.

Hara was to some extent a victim of a tendency toward type-casting implicit in the Japanese star system of the period. While some actors, such as Sugimura Haruko, were able to escape its limitations, others were bound to a certain characterization that was sustained in the off-screen discourse of tabloids and film journals. The genre of the home-drama or *shoshimin-eiga* arguably sustained the aesthetics of transparency in its realist ideology of humanist asceticism, but unlike Italian neorealism, the performers were not deigned to be "non-actors" but were movie stars. The minimalist architecture and sparse furnishings of the Japanese home embodied a realist aesthetic of honesty and transparency that inevitably affected, and was sustained by, the star-images of the actors appearing in the home-drama. The star system itself was to some extent built on a foundation of "typage." Most of Toho studio's postwar stars, including Mifune Toshiro, were trained in Toho's "New Face" programme.²⁸ In this democratization of celebrity, applicants were auditioned and trained by the studio and gradually integrated into the production schedule, a practice that prioritized a natural "look" over acting training and experience.

Certainly a large part of Hara's popular appeal was due to a certain honesty and integrity of character, enhanced by the home drama genre that kept her in extremely plain costumes, but one can not sustain the image of the "eternal virgin" forever. Her screen persona is one of tight control, under which a current of strong emotion can often be detected. However, she also excelled in expressing highly contradictory and conflicted emotions. She can be at once hopeful and doubtful at marriage proposals; she laughs when she is most sad and cries when she is most happy. The contradictions and tensions within Hara's star-image are very much bound up with a nativist sensibility, a longing for the past combined with a knowledge of the impossibility of such a return. Her perplexing facial expressions, in conjunction with very correct posture, points to a well-protected privacy that was confirmed with her early retirement. Among her secrets is her reputed quarter-German heritage that may account for her slightly Caucasian look. The mask for Hara constitutes a kind of doubleness, as if her "well-proportioned beauty" were only one layer, the public one, of a more complex personality that remains hidden beneath it.



TAKAMINE HIDEKO

Endurance and Tenacity

Actors in the classical era of Japanese cinema were contracted by studios and often made up to ten films a year. Anderson and Richie claim that there were far fewer stars than in the Hollywood system, and they therefore worked much harder.²⁹ This is indeed one of the key features of Takamine Hideko's star-image: a certain toughness developed over years of work in the film industry. Debuting in 1929 at the age of five, Takamine successfully made the transition from child star, to teenager, to maturity in the 1950s. Her last film was made in 1979, and she published her autobiography in the 1970s. When Takamine got married in 1955 at the age of 31, she boldly stated that she wanted to "create a new style of wife who has a job."³⁰ Affectionately referred to by journalists as "Deko-chan," she was compelled to answer many questions about her dual status, although she scaled back her acting commitments a great deal once her husband was able to support them comfortably.³¹

As one historian has said of this actress, "Takamine's women were not willing to wait patiently until the next life for their rewards, as Japanese heroines used to do."³² Indeed it is this sense of impatience and dissatisfaction that characterizes Takamine's contribution to the construction of the modern Japanese woman. During the occupation, she performed for American troops; she played a stripper in the first colour film in Japan, *Carmen Comes Home* (1951), and she starred in a musical called *Ginza Can-Can Girl* (1949). But she was only a pin-up girl for a brief period. Having flouted her sexuality according to the demands of the period, she managed to restore a sense of decorum and integrity to her star-image and became an icon of the Japanese woman who is not necessarily beautiful in her suffering, but persevering, dedicated and intelligent. Unlike Hara, Takamine very rarely smiles, but wears a mask that is something more like a scowl or a grimace, as in her various roles she endures an endless series of financial and romantic hardships.

In many of her roles, Takamine displays the seriousness associated with her hard-working star-image; but she also maintains a certain independence and autonomy from the other characters. Takamine made seventeen films with Naruse, of which *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*, 1955) is the best known in Japan and *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1960) is probably the best known to English-speaking audiences. In the former she plays a love-sick romantic heroine who is fixated on a man who clearly doesn't deserve her attentions. The tenacity with which she pursues her lover, however, becomes emblematic of the struggle for survival in postwar Japan. In the 1960 film she plays a bar hostess who runs her own busi-



Takamine Hideko in
When a Woman Ascends the Stairs



Takamine Hideko and Masayuki Mori in *Untamed*

ness, resigned to her fate as a single woman outside the family system of mainstream society.

Although Naruse was notorious for the lack of direction he gave to his actors, Takamine seemed to work well within his system, perfecting the art of looking away from other characters at crucial moments in a scene, co-operating perfectly with Naruse's découpage of glances and down-cast eyes. A typical Takamine performance of stubborn aloofness can be found in *Nagareru* (*Flowing*, 1956) in which she plays the daughter of a

geisha who runs a geisha house on the brink of bankruptcy. The mother is played by the veteran actress Isuzu Yamada, and the film also features Tanaka Kinuyo as the maid and Sugimura Haruko as one of the geisha. Okada Mariko plays a younger feisty geisha. In this company of actresses, in this house of women playing out their anachronistic roles in a postwar society, Takamine's character is the odd woman out. When she goes for a stroll with a young man beside the river, the potential romance of the moment is deflated when Takamine stops and announces that she will never marry because who would marry the daughter of a geisha? Wearing a tight sweater, and framed against the backdrop of an industrial skyline, she is very much the image of the new, independent woman. By the end of the film, she has bought a sewing machine to earn an income her own way.

In a 1954 interview with Yukio Mishima, Takamine discusses her favourite Hollywood actors, Ingrid Bergman and James Stewart. Mishima suggests that "someone with strong characteristics has to be a supporting actor," and they agree that Takamine has "no characteristics," which is why she is so well suited to leading roles.³³ Takamine also notes that she respects the fact that Bergman "cannot play a role which is not like herself." This conversation, like much of the popular commentary on acting in Japan as well as elsewhere, assumes a certain transparency, rather than technique, as the condition of "great acting." Mishima and Takamine's comments also remind us that American films were extremely popular in 1950s Japan, and the influences on film acting cannot be denied. Takamine's role in Naruse's *Arakure* (*Untamed*, 1957) suggests the influence of Rosalind Russell and Katharine Hepburn's screwball comedy roles of the 1940s. Set in the Taisho (1912-26) period with bizarre Edwardian costumes, Takamine's character goes through a series of lovers and husbands, as well as professions, from a maid to running a tailoring business. At one point she discovers that her husband (Kato Daisuke) has been having an affair and she lays into him with fists flying. They roll around thrashing at each other until they're tired, then she sits up, fixes her hair and gives him a shy sideways look, and they embrace and make up.

The roles Takamine played are far more diverse than Hara's, not only over the course of her lengthy career, but even in the 1950s. *Arakure* is indeed an unusual and anomalous film. Far more popular was *Twenty-four Eyes* (Kinoshita, 1954), the film that Mishima and Takamine discuss in their magazine conversation. As a schoolteacher who loses several students in the war, Takamine's character ages 20 years in this film, and we see her transformed from a bicycle-riding young woman to an old grey-haired spinster weeping over photos of her pupils as young children. Takamine's appearance was indeed quite versatile, and unlike Hara, her star-image was not dependent on



Takamine Hideko in *Ukigumo* (Naruse, 1955)

beauty, although there is no shortage of glamour shots of her in the magazines and film posters of the time. *Twenty-four Eyes* and *Ukigumo* were hugely popular narratives of the postwar period. Both are extremely sentimental, in keeping with the tendency of the most popular Japanese cinema. Both films detail the privations and poverty of the postwar period, and might also be read as instances of a restoration of nobility to the national consciousness. But this kind of reading depends a great deal on understanding an actress such as Takamine as portraying a quintessential Japanese woman, a portrayal that had to be sustained on and off-screen.

Maintaining this image was no easy task, as one anecdote about Tanaka Kinuyo suggests. Shortly after the war, Tanaka spent some time in Hollywood, and returned sporting sunglasses and an apparently transformed personality, having abandoned the modesty and reserve associated with so many of her characters. The press, according to one report, "reacted violently to what it saw as a betrayal of native values. Tanaka was scathingly criticized for several years thereafter for almost every role she played."³⁴ Takamine went to Paris in 1951 for six months, but she reported only loneliness and boredom, this being virtually the first hiatus from her hard-working career that she had ever taken. She may have escaped the negative publicity that Tanaka's trip abroad provoked, but not the double standard imposed on Japanese actresses. She was clearly ill-equipped and unprepared to take advantage of her foreign experience, and yet her career was not negatively affected.

Takamine's comments on acting suggest that for her it was a job that she could not quit soon enough. She claims that she remained in the business after the success of *Ukigumo* in 1955 against her will, as if she could not let down her studio, Toho, or the industry itself. Although many actors in Japan received formal training in a variety of acting techniques, including a Stanislavsky-derived method that was introduced to Japan in the Taisho period, Takamine had been trained on the job. Very outspoken about the difficulties of her career (which is also in the interests of preserving a certain modesty and humility regarding her talents), she describes her first twenty years as being a "money making machine" for her family.³⁵ Like Hara, she manages to turn her career as a movie star into a noble sacrifice. In 1955, when she became the top star in the country, Takamine published a confessional accounting of her reported salary of 500,000 yen per month. At a time when 48% of salaries were less than 8,000 yen per month, it was necessary to assure her fans that there were many expenses associated with her profession, including American cigarettes and a private secretary.³⁶ It is true that studios did not cover these expenses for their stars,³⁷ but her "confession" is indicative of her need to bridge the class gap that was widening between her screen persona and her off-screen status as a rich woman.

SUGIMURA HARUKO

and the Representation of Female Subjectivity

The last actress I want to consider here is Sugimura Haruko, who was never as big a star as either Hara or Takamine, but who is one of the most familiar faces to viewers of Japanese film of the classical period. She was a little older in the 1950s than Hara and Takamine, and she was often cast in supporting roles. One of her most well-known parts is as Shige, the selfish older sister in Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, in which she is contrasted with Hara, who plays the selfless daughter-in-law. In a 1958 magazine article, critic Tsumura Hideo describes Sugimura's characters as "mannish" and greedy, and admires her series of "bad women," although he assures his readers that she actually has a "nice jovial plain personality" and wishes more directors brought out that side of her.³⁸

Sugimura is clearly a very different actress than Hara and Takamine, partly because she was trained in the Stanislavskian method. Sato notes that actors with Shingeki training, based on Western dramatic models, tended to be cast in supporting roles, more often than as leads.³⁹ Sugimura was an actor's actor, respected and admired by her colleagues more so than by the public.⁴⁰ Throughout the 1950s, she continued to perform in Shingeki theatre, as well as taking on numerous film roles. Sugimura's *Variety* obituary describes her as "a lady of the stage," and indeed she was a member of an important theatre group, for which she won a cultural merit award in 1974.⁴¹ She starred in more than 900 performances of a play called "Life of a Woman", and performed in at least one TV series in the 1970s as a middle-aged housewife who runs her husband's business.⁴² There is no question that Sugimura's contribution to the construction of the postwar Japanese woman was significant. Because she almost always played older women, she was more or less desexualized, and could therefore get away with more unorthodox behaviour than some of her contemporaries. She may not have played ideal women, but her characterizations constitute a female subjectivity quite unlike the ideals of stoicism and beautiful suffering associated with actors like Hara and Takamine.

Sugimura's characters often reveal levels of disappointment, ambition and excitement that would more typically be hidden and kept private by Japanese women. Sugimura has a way of sneering that is especially transgressive of the norms of polite society. As Shige in *Tokyo Story*, she runs a beauty salon from the street level of her home, brusquely ordering around her husband as well as her employees. One of her starring roles was in Naruse's film *Late Chrysanthemums* (1954) in which she plays a retired geisha who lends money to her former down-

and-out geisha friends. As in *Tokyo Story*, her character is associated with the new values of independence and economic survival of the postwar period. Here she has a submissive deaf maid who she keeps around so as to protect her conversations, all of which concern money. While she is cold and uncaring about one former lover, she becomes girlishly excited about a visit from another man (played by Uehara, in yet another role as a delinquent salary-man). She primped and preened for him, but when he, too, asks to borrow money, her disappointment is conveyed by a palpable shift in expression. She sighs, throws her handkerchief on the table, and looks at the man sideways, saying in voice-over, "I was a fool to be happy." It is her accomplishment as much as it is Naruse's to have developed this character who is at once cold, calculating, and committed to living alone, but who in this scene is suddenly sympathetic and deeply hurt.

Sugimura's acting achievement in film has not gone entirely unrecognized. The German director Daniel Schmid has described meeting Sugimura and being greatly impressed by her commitment to "the holy idea of the medium itself, which did not consist of the film roles in the movie theatre, but rather of the illusion, which appeared on the screen."⁴³ And yet it is precisely her technical ability to create characters who were entirely "realistic" that kept her on the margins of the Japanese star system at the height of her career. Schmid claims that Sugimura saw herself as an "intermediary" between herself and her characters; and indeed she had nothing of the iconicity of Hara's beauty or Takamine's stoicism, but instead had the flexibility of a highly developed technique. In Ozu's 1959 *Floating Weeds* she plays opposite Nakamura Ganjiro as a long-suffering mistress in kimono pouring sake for her man, endowing the role with far more pent-up emotion and regret than any other female role in Ozu's oeuvre. Instead of Hara's enigmatic smile, she uses vocal range and the movements involved in domestic chores to convey her unarticulated desires, much as Hara does in her roles in Naruse films.

Conclusion

The three actresses I have discussed here might be seen as representing a kind of continuum of acting styles that range from Hara's mask-like ritualistic stiffness at one extreme, to Sugimura's more expressive use of body language and props at the other. Takamine we can place somewhere in between, as she has more of an emotional range than Hara, yet retains some of the modesty and moral integrity associated with Hara's restraint. Several theorists have argued that traditional Japanese culture lacks the duality of exterior and interior, body and soul, that is such a cornerstone of melodramatic acting styles in the West as well as a key component of method acting.⁴⁴ The introduction of realist acting styles to Japanese theatre and cinema thus entailed a shift in the very conception of the subject. If in Japanese the same word *omote* refers to both mask and face,⁴⁵ the "meaning" of an actor's expression is leg-

ible on its surface; as Roland Barthes has argued, "there is no inwardness" in classical Japanese theatre.⁴⁶ There is something called *netsuen*, or intense display of emotion, derived from Kabuki, which refers to excessive performance, perhaps like the domestic violence performed by Takamine in *Arakure*. However, the privacy of intimate emotions is traditionally absent, like women, from public view.

The production of an inwardness of subjective expression is implicitly linked to modern acting techniques. However, the withholding of inwardness, in the context of cinematic narrative, can also signify a morality linked to a national culture that protects a certain reading of the body. The spectacle of the woman's body may have been a key ingredient of Japanese modernity, and a liberation for the male viewer, but the emergence of female subjectivity was grounded in the "everyday" genre of the home-drama. In the 1950s the construction of femininity remained precariously balanced between the emergence of female subjectivity and a protection of traditional gender roles. The three actresses Hara, Takamine and Sugimura were involved in a complex production of femininity which could still be identified as "Japanese" in its restraint, but also signified the desiring subjectivity of the modern woman.

I would like to conclude by returning to Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, in which both Sugimura and Hara have key roles. The Sugimura character, Shige, might be described as the film's anti-heroine. Within the terms of the film's own moral universe, she is unquestionably the bad sister, especially when she starts requesting her mother's best clothes and jewellery within hours of the old woman's death. She refuses to take the time to entertain her parents when they come to Tokyo, and instead she phones Noriko/Hara, the wife of her brother who died in the war. Noriko works in an office and politely asks her boss for time off. Hara's character is unquestionably the "better daughter," and Hara the bigger movie star, while Sugimura, as an actor, is practically invisible. Her realist method acting provides the background for Hara's formal beauty; and in this sense she is very much part of the city that the film is named for, which is depicted in the film as an ugly sprawling metropolis. It is only perhaps within a cross-cultural, or historically displaced, analysis that Sugimura's performance comes into legibility—that we can read her as an expressive subjectivity. In an inversion of the Hara and Sugimura characters in *Tokyo Story*, Shige can be understood as refusing to make the sacrifices that Noriko makes, and refusing to accept the disappointments of life to which Hara's character is so emphatically resigned.

The analysis that I am suggesting here is one that reads performances against the star-images that contextualized the original, indigenous, screenings. And yet perhaps those meanings were also available for the huge audiences of women who we know were there at the cinema.⁴⁷ Perhaps Sugimura's invisibility also speaks to the films' discourses of realism. Her technique of acting out, of her subtle resistance





to the ongoing disappointments of life, may have carried some weight with Japanese women in the 1950s as well. Sugimura makes extensive use of props, in keeping with her method training. As she talks to Noriko on the phone, she fans away the oppressive heat with a fan decorated with a woman's picture, and although the face is indistinguishable, it could easily be Hara's own face printed on it. I wonder if women in the audience would have felt closer to that idealized image, or to the woman using it to cool herself off? Indeed the textual openness of Japanese cinema of the 1950s that has been privileged by auteurist and formalist critics needs to be extended to its complex modes of address, including the codes of performance and stardom by which new gender roles were negotiated during the postwar, post-Occupation, period.

The few comments from journalists of the period that I have cited here suggest that popular actresses like Hara and Takamine were treated as tragic royalty. As rich and powerful women, they were "outside" society, and yet they had deep obligations to preserve certain ideals of gender, such as beauty and "naturalness." While different directors elicit different performances and enabled these actors to develop a range of char-

acters, the popular press tended to reinforce a banal image of the nice, gentle, good-humoured woman. In fact, I believe there is far more complexity to these stars and their various roles than conventional film criticism has thus far revealed. As Walter Benjamin has argued, "the history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power."⁴⁸

Insofar as Japanese cinema of the 1950s constitutes a vivid engagement with rapidly changing cultural norms and values, it exemplifies Benjamin's observation that "the meaning of the concrete realities in the work will no doubt remain hidden from the poet and the public of his time."⁴⁹ From the perspective of 50 years later, in a greatly altered global cultural landscape, the "concrete realities" of 1950s Japanese cinema might begin to come to light. Specifically, the mixture of acting styles that informed the films of the period can be understood as being at once culturally coded, and gender-biased. While the protection of interiority and limited range of expressivity associated with Hara's star-image served to perpetuate an image of gendered "Japaneseness," the method acting of Sugimura made the actress virtually unknowable and slightly threatening.

These actresses, along with many others, including not only



Takamine Hideko, but Tanaka Kinuyo, Kyo Machiko and others, were among the most visible women in Japanese popular culture. Their vital contribution to the cinema of this “golden era” of the 1950s was also a contribution to a redefinition of the feminine in the postwar period. In the ongoing construction of Japanese modernity, their roles were particularly crucial in that this cinema of the 1950s was also an incursion into the international, global scene of popular culture—even if it was framed as “art cinema” outside Japan. Within this exportable form of Japanese culture, Japanese audiences were also able to see how others saw them. These “new subjectivities” need to be recognized as inhabiting and constituting a Japanese modernity that may not have been invented in the 1950s (and in fact dates well back into the Tokugawa era), but for the first time features a public display of many complex female subjects. The contradictions embodied in their star-images and performance styles are deeply embedded in the conflicting ideologies of what some have described as “the confusion era” of postwar Japan.

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Acknowledgements

This paper was researched with the assistance of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Toshiko Kumagai for invaluable research assistance and translation of Japanese-language materials and Louis Pelletier and Adam Rosadiuk for additional research assistance. Thanks also to Chika Kinoshita for her comments on an early draft of this article.

Please note that all names are in Japanese name-order with last names first, except for those writers who have published in English with their names in Western name-order.

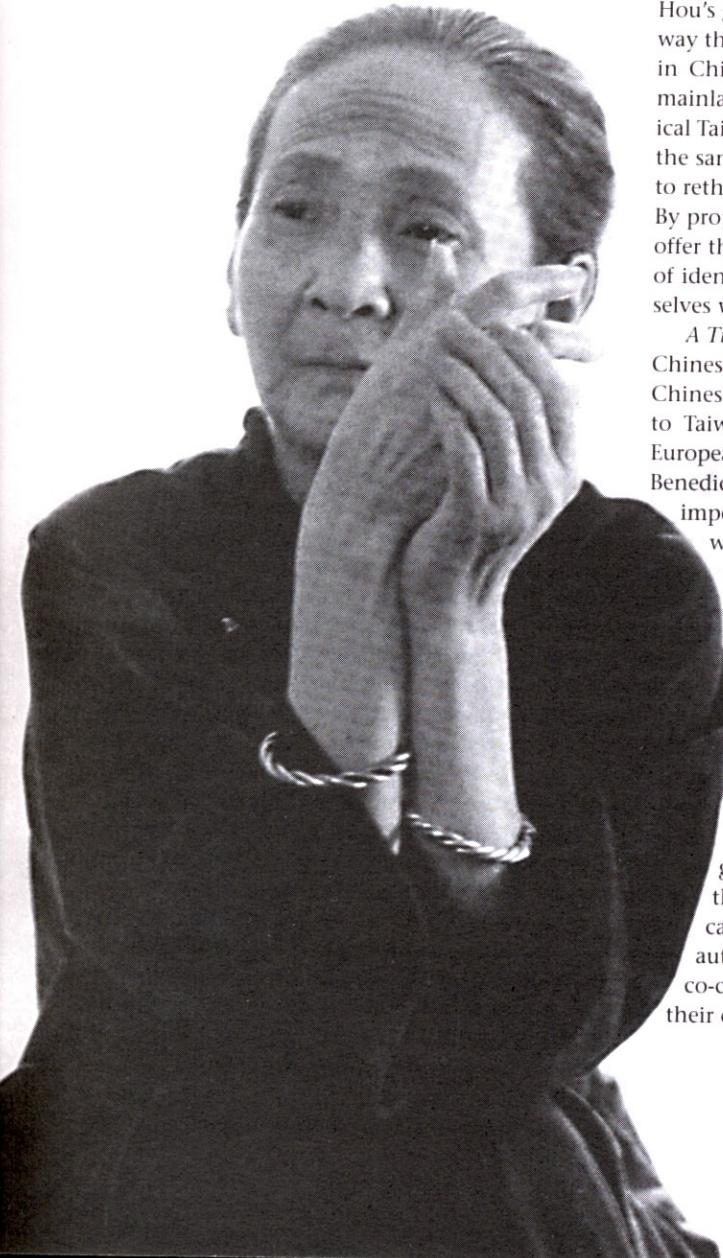
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- 19 Donald Richie, *Different People: Pictures of Some Japanese*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1987, p.12.
- 20 Robin Wood, “Resistance to Definition: Ozu’s ‘Noriko’ Trilogy,” in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p.115.
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- 31 Birnbaum p.249.
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- 35 Birnbaum p.213.
- 36 Marcel Giuglaris, *Le cinéma japonais (1896-1955)*, Paris: éditions du cerf, 1956, p.56.
- 37 Anderson and Richie, p.394.
- 38 Tsumura Hideo, “Sugimura Haruko’s Personality and Performance,” *Syufu no Tomo*, June 1958, trans. Toshiko Kumagai.
- 39 Tadao Sato, “The Multilayered Nature of the Tradition of Acting in Japanese Cinema,” in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India and China*, Wimal Dissanayake ed., Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1988, p.50.
- 40 Takamine actually cites Sugimura as one of her models, and specifically mentions a scene from a film called *Spring on Leper’s Island* in which Sugimura keeps her back to the audience, because, says Takamine, “she probably didn’t want to expose her ugly, disfigured face”—as she was playing a leper (Birnbaum p.230).
- 41 Jon Herskovitz, “Haruko Sugimura” *Variety* Jan 19, 1998, p.100.
- 42 Sato, *Currents In Japanese Cinema*, p.82.
- 43 Daniel Schmid, “In Memory of the great actress Haruko Sugimura,” in *Mikio Naruse, Shigeziko Hasumi and Sadao Yamane*, eds., *Festival Internacional de Cine de San Sebastián*, Madrid, 1998, p.147. Schmid directed a film partly about Sugimura entitled *The Written Face* (1995).
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Looking for Nostalgia

MEMORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN HOU HSIAO-HSIEN'S *A TIME TO LIVE, A TIME TO DIE*

by I-Fen Wu



Hou Hsiao-Hsien is generally regarded as the most important director in Taiwanese New Wave Cinema. His films made between 1983 and 1996 have a consistent focus on Taiwan's past that mark them as the most important materials dealing with histories and social changes as they unfold. His best known films, *A City of Sadness* (*Beiqing chengshi*, 1989), along with *The Puppetmaster* (*Ximeng zensheng*, 1993), and *Good Men Good Women* (*Haona naomu*, 1995), form a trilogy representing Taiwan's colonial history, manifesting his approach to the collective memories of Taiwan, revealing his confidence in expanding the sphere of subject matter from the individual to the public.

Before making *A City of Sadness*, Hou consistently drew on his personal life experiences and those of his co-writers' in the overall structure of the narratives, through which he represented the history of the increasingly industrialised and westernised Taiwan. *The Boys from Fengkuei* (*Fengkuei lai de ren*, 1983) was adapted from Hou's adolescent experience; *A Summer at Grandpa's* (*Dong-Dong de jiaqi*, 1984) was based on its screenwriter Chu Tien-Wen's short story, and was about her childhood at her grandparents' home in central Taiwan; *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (*Tongnian wangshi*, 1985) was strongly autobiographical of Hou himself; *Dust in the Wind* (*Lianlian fengchen*, 1986) was its screenwriter Wu Nien-Jen's memory of growing up in a miner's family. These films looked at the past with nostalgia, filled with remembrances of childhood and adolescence, but nevertheless depicted Hou's generation in ideological movement, redefining national identity in a way that did not centre on ethnicity. Hou is a Chinese Hakka, who was born in China and grew up in Taiwan; Chu Tien-Wen is a second generation mainlander, whose mother is a Taiwanese Hakka, and Wu Nien-Jen is a typical Taiwanese.¹ These three people with different ethnic backgrounds shared the same experience of living in Taiwan, which became the trigger for them to rethink the meaning of national history and reconstruct it on the screen. By projecting themselves into their films, Hou and his screenwriters tried to offer the cinematic equivalent of historical representation, raising questions of identity on a symbolic level, in which they appeared to articulate themselves while simultaneously being articulated into history.

A Time to Live, A Time to Die represents the history of the 1950s, when the Chinese Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-Shek was defeated by the Chinese Communist party in the Chinese Civil War, and formally retreated to Taiwan with a substantial wave of refugees in 1949. Compared with European migrations to America, Australia, and New Zealand, which were, as Benedict Anderson points out, largely due to the expansion of European imperial and colonial power, the Chinese migrations to southeast Asia were, on the contrary, rarely the products of overseas adventures or territorial expansion planned by the Middle Kingdom.² Either because of wars or the hardship of life, the inhabitants of southeast China had been moving to Taiwan since the seventeenth century, which paved the way for the Taiwan's gradual development as part of Chinese culture. The last great wave of Chinese migration to Taiwan, which took place between 1945 and 1949, produced two million refugees who sought refuge from calamity rather than seeking a good life, and who became a privileged community as the Nationalist government was eager to construct a de-Japanised Taiwan as soon as possible, with policies implemented through language and education. The Chinese-speaking refugees newly-arrived thereby grew to be the dominant group in post-war Taiwan, a rare case of a social minority forcing Taiwan to identify with Chinese authority through the gradual absorption of its population into politico-cultural units. Like the Europeans who had begun to name places in their colonies with new versions of old toponyms in their lands of origin,

the Chinese Nationalist government renamed Taiwanese cities after their own, particularly in Taipei, intending to create an imagined China in Taiwan, as if they were the only legal authority representing China.³ Viewing itself as the inheritor of China, the Nationalist government in Taiwan aimed to have these new places safeguard the continuing authority rather than the parallelism of the old ones; in other words, China and Taiwan did not co-exist in equality—the relationship between them was a fight for inheritance rather than a sibling competition.

Intensely embedded in a climate of political and cultural disciplines, the historical landscape of post-war Taiwan was marked by an era in which the very notion and function of history was to create a sense of “Chineseness”, and to repress the shape of memory about Taiwan into a prohibited issue. This hidden corner is illuminated in Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, in which the director not only meditates on a forbidden era of historical memory, but also on the political issues that inform the widely shared memory of the national past. Hou has strong ties to the characters whose memories are portrayed in the film: he is from the second generation of mainlanders growing up in Kaohsiung, as his family moved to Taiwan in 1947 when he was one year old. Representing the past through his personal memory, Hou’s *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is strongly autobiographical, and his voice-over narration over the opening shots indicates that this film is about the memory of his childhood. Like his other two films, *A Summer at Grandpa’s*, which was actually shot at its screenplay writer, Chu Tien-Wen’s grandparents’ home, and *Dust in the Wind* at its screenplay writer, Wu Nien-Jen’s home town, Hou shot this film in the house where he grew up in southern Taiwan, in order to add the authenticity of his memory. Revealing a nostalgic impulse surrounding the era of the 1950s, *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* reflects a historical moment in which the past is recollected through a memory of youth that embodies a certain vision of Taiwan’s history. Instead of probing the sensitive issues of political conflicts and historical ambiguities to emphasise the historical reality, *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* focuses on ordinary family life without delineating dramatic ups and downs, simply seizing history through the transformation of a family. Memory of childhood provides a focus in this film for turning the past into a nostalgic preservation of a history which is repressed and rewritten, and turns the past into a narrative that offers profundity to an era whose history is officially defined.

Turning nostalgia into a series of history, Hou’s *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* illustrates the past in a regressive way in which it is recalled as it has been remembered. This film is certainly not the only one in Taiwanese New Cinema in which nostalgia impels memory to re-trace history. Edward Yang’s *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), and Wu Nien-Jen’s *A Borrowed Life* (1994), for instance, are both complex and suggestive about the era of their childhood, touching upon some ambiguous areas of Taiwanese history.⁴ But the significance of *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* lies in its approach of tracing history, which focuses not merely on the issue of identity of the Chinese mainlanders, as dealt with in *A Brighter Summer Day*, nor simply on the impact of the colonial authority upon the Taiwanese, as tackled in *A Borrowed Life*; it shows the process in which a second generation Chinese mainlander identifies with Taiwan through his growing experience which, though deeply imbued with nostalgia, reflects the national past and points to a shift of socio-political climate. This sense of nostalgia does not only influence the

film’s presentation of the past, but also implicitly mirrors the changing political and cultural landscape of the 1980s, when Taiwan was about to start its political and social reformations. Shot one year before the establishment of Taiwan’s first opposition party, the Democratic Progress Party (DPP), two years before lifting the fifty-year martial law, and three years before the collapse of Chiang’s regime, *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* has been assumed to represent an awakening of national consciousness, cloaking the director’s search for national identity in the folds of history. At the time this film appeared, Hou Hsiao-Hsien was one of the few directors engaged in a process of national soul searching, reconstructing history as a function of reflecting the present. Preoccupied with memory, the tone of historical nostalgia that pervades *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is set in order to foreground the issue of national identity that has been silenced from the late 1940s through to the 1980s. As Pierre Nora declares, “only memory gives the idea of the Nation... its pertinence and its legitimacy”;⁵ it is precisely Hou’s memory that becomes a strategy for constructing the national past, having a fully historical grasp of the past and the present, and addressing the potential problem of Taiwanese people’s national identity which has previously been refused acknowledgement by the Chinese Nationalist government.

A Time to Live, A Time to Die is probably the closest film to Hou’s heart precisely because it is strongly autobiographical. It begins with Hou’s voice-over narration, which flows through the scenes, in which the camera shoots in extreme long shots, of his father sitting in front of his desk, his mother and elder sister cooking in the kitchen, and his brothers playing together in the house, heightening the sense that he is an insider looking at a world to which he himself belonged. Hou combines spontaneous performances from non-professional actors with a stylised visual use of the long shot to capture the richness of everyday life, giving a visual purity through the simple storyline and the startling simplicity of fixed-frame shots. A subtle nostalgia is evoked in the opening shots in which the memory of Ah-Ha’s (Hou’s) childhood prevails in the recurring images of his profile of family life, which create an atmosphere that seems to blur the boundary between images and reality, reviving the historical era of the 1950s and 1960s.

As the film title disappears, Hou moves the focus to Ah-Ha, who is summoned by his grandmother in Hakka dialect while he is playing a game with his friends in the village square, and is then seen to bury his money and marbles under a big tree before going home. The images of the square and the tree, as well as Ah-Ha’s home, are repeated throughout the film shot at a similar angle, as a contrast between the unchanging landscape and life’s changes, implying that history remains constant through the variation of life. As the shape of the past is gradually accumulated through the images of childhood memory which are glimpsed from the opening scenes, it is worth noting that a broad historical context is also being unfolded; for example, as the film opens, the family’s Japanese style house comes into shot, which reminds the viewer that the Japanese government retreated from Taiwan as it was defeated in World War II, and that later many mainlanders moved to Taiwan to take over the property left vacant by the Japanese. Often shot with long takes at eye level, the scenes of the family’s Japanese house display a spectacular *mise-en-scène*, commanding a limited field of vision, which demands the viewer’s participation in the characters’ everyday lives. Hou’s cinematic style in *A Time to Live, A*

Time to Die parallels that of the Japanese director, Yasujiro Ozu, who was fond of shooting scenes at eye level with 360 degree space, and often framed his shots with the features of Japanese architecture such as doors and corridors to create spatial possibilities. Although Hou has never admitted Ozu's influence upon his films, his *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, however, looks similar to Ozu's style. For example, the Japanese paper door, which is framed in the centre, divides the screen into at least three areas: the father's study, the living room, and the kitchen off-screen. This creates a second frame inside the film frame, and emphasises the graphic qualities of the images. When Ah-Ha is chased by his mother around the paper door to retrieve the money he has stolen, the off-screen space outside the frame is emphasised as Ah-Ha ascends and descends the stairs several times, which not only extends the visual dimensions of the movie screen into an invisible area, but also reminds the viewer that what is outside the frame could possibly add significance to the framed action preferred by the camera.⁶

It is graphically fascinating to create visual dimensions by framing the doors, but most importantly, the visible and invisible in front of and behind the doors, as well as the audible and the inaudible inside or outside the house, provide the backdrop to Hou's construction of history. His arrangement of mise-en-scène and filmic narrative in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is in every way an illustration of nostalgia, through which he displays historical and cultural complexities. The specific Hakka background of Ah-Ha's family is firstly manifested at the beginning of the film when Ah-Ha's grandmother repeatedly calls his nickname, Ah-Ha-Gu, in Hakka, and the use of dialect in the family emphasises the generation gap between Ah-Ha and his parents. Here it comes into the sharp focus that Ah-Ha's parents and grandmother never speak Mandarin nor Taiwanese, and on the contrary, that Ah-Ha and his siblings rarely speak Hakka. Ah-Ha spontaneously responds to his mother in Mandarin when he denies stealing her money, and later, Ah-Ha's brother tells his grandmother in Mandarin that Ah-Ha has passed his examination. The language diversity reflects different attitudes towards history between the Chinese mainlanders and their children, which is particularly obvious when memory plays a role shaping history. For instance, when the whole family is sitting together in the autumn afternoon, chewing sugarcane in the living room, Ah-Ha's father talks about the death of his close friend when he studied in Guangdong. Listening to his father's remembrance of the past, Ah-Ha's mother joins the talk and tells what happened to this friend's wife before she learned of her husband's death. None of the children speak, except the elder sister, who occasionally responds to her mother in Mandarin, and they all sit quietly chewing the sugarcane, unable to participate in their parents' memories.

The children's alienation from their parents' memories suggests that the construction of historical sense mainly relies on a shared memory of the past, a point which is manifested in the scene in which Ah-Ha's aunt sends a letter from South Africa to pass on the news of his adopted brother, Ah-Ching, who was left in the mainland by their parents. While Ah-Ha's parents sob in regret at leaving him alone in Guangdong after reading the letter, Ah-Ha's younger brothers seem to be more excited about removing the foreign stamps to put in their album, rather than paying attention to hear from a brother whom they have never met. The parents' memory of the past emphasises the connection between China and Taiwan, the continuity between past

and present, but in fact forms an unbridgeable chasm between them and their children in the realm of national history. Unaware that the change of political situation in 1949 has led to a conspicuously new construction of historical identity, Ah-Ha's parents depend upon their memories in China for a sense of identity, which eventually turns them away from the changing historical and cultural landscapes of Taiwan. A strong sense of emotional dissonance is thus raised when the younger generation cannot sense the most profound tremors of their parents' past. There are scenes in which Ah-Ha turns down his grandmother and asks curiously, "what do we do in China?" when his grandmother enthusiastically asks him to go back to China with her. Ah-Ha cannot figure out why she is so keen to return to China as their home is in Taiwan. On that summer afternoon, Ah-Ha and his grandmother are walking along the country road, and it is later understood that she is taking him back to the mainland. Cutting to a tracking shot of a road on which Ah-Ha and his grandmother are strolling, and back to the long shots with long takes of the train and the landscape, the camera shots beautifully frame the countryside of southern Taiwan, portraying its geographical beauty in a painterly composition. While taking a rest at a snack vendor, the grandmother patiently asks the owner, a village girl, how to get to Mekong Bridge in Mei County but is not understood at all, as Hakka dialect is not spoken everywhere in Taiwan, and the bridge is not known. The road back to Mei County in Guangdong, which is intensely remembered by the grandmother, is not only her most profound memory of *home*, it also embodies the values of an aged woman's identification with nation, which has been emotionally lived in the geographical and historical landscape of China. The grandmother's confused sense of geography clearly relates to her loss of historical sense, which is bound to her memory of the past, and deeply imbued with the consciousness of a society that she used to know. Unable to acknowledge the transformation of society and transmit its values, the grandmother has not only lost her sense of geography but also that of history. Her wish to return to China becomes a delusion, which draws a boundary that binds her to her imaginary world in which she cannot recognise the fact that Mekong Bridge is no longer a link in the journey home and that she can never walk back to the mainland, because the Taiwan Strait geographically separates Taiwan and China, over which there is no bridge.

Embedded in their insistent nostalgia, which enables them to believe the political propaganda of the Chinese Nationalist government, which declares its authority to represent the mainland, Ah-Ha's parents and grandmother resist recognising the changing cultural and historical landscape, brought about by political transformation, and refuse to identify with a society which has nothing to do with their struggles and memories of China. Their estrangement from Taiwan is made clear when the eldest daughter goes through her parents' belongings after the mother's funeral, among which is the father's memoir. The shot is focused on the father's calligraphic handwriting while the daughter reads and sobs. She tells her brothers that their father did not plan to stay long in Taiwan, and therefore bought all cheap bamboo furniture; he did not even let their mother have a sewing machine for many years. It is precisely his desire to return to China that defines him in an ideological position which is politically and historically indifferent to Taiwan. The parents and grandmother all seem to confront the ideological conflicts as their memories of the past shadow the present,



which makes the contrast between the past and the present more complex. The ideological contradiction is implied in the visual images: Ah-Ha's grandmother frequently gets lost whenever she is out of the house; Ah-Ha's parents are always framed inside the Japanese style house; the fence of the house is often shot with a closed entrance door. It can be said that the fence signals a boundary that divides inside and outside, the present and the past, reality and the imaginary, separating Ah-Ha's parents and grandmother from the shift in historical and cultural patterns.

Inside the fence is the parents' legendary narrative of the past, and outside is the children's plenitude of the present that points to a broader social and cultural phenomenon, embracing a certain idea of Taiwanese identity. Ah-Ha speaks Taiwanese when he plays with local children in the village. In the scene in which Ah-Ha and his friends spin a top in the village square, the shot is focused on the spinning top, while the children's Taiwanese quarrel is loudly heard off-screen. In school, Ah-Ha speaks Mandarin with his classmates, as it is strictly prohibited for students to speak Taiwanese at schools. After the bell rings for next class, the next scene is in Ah-Ha's classroom, in which a boy stands in front of all the students, announcing with a joking manner that "teacher says we are returning to the mainland China!" Ah-Ha slings a stone at him, yelling, "you are lying"; the whole class laughs and starts to make a noise. Here Hou uses language to imply Ah-Ha's identification with Taiwan, and again, to emphasise that the mainland exists only in the imaginary realm, which is remote and unpalpable to Ah-Ha's generation.

When told to get ready to return to the mainland, the young Ah-Ha takes it as a joke; when playing pool with friends in the local soldiers' club, the adult Ah-Ha has a fight with a mainlan-

der, who is irritated by their having fun while he and his companions are listening to the live broadcast of the vice-president's funeral. Shot in a certain distance with a long take and low-key lighting, it is difficult to understand what is going on between the mainland and Ah-Ha's group through the visual image, as the figures are not easily distinguishable until Ah-Ha is dragged out of the club, and we see that he is the one in trouble. When dealing with the gang fight, Hou has his camera shots fixed at a distance, intending to have the tension prevalent but not to judge who is right or wrong, and this shooting style is often seen in his other films. (e.g. *The Boys from Fengkuei*, and later, *A City of Sadness*) The camera shot remains at the same angle after Ah-Ha is taken out, focusing on the window through which Ah-Ha is seen, impatiently and angrily, to stand next to the mainland who is nagging him to behave more properly, with respect to the late vice-president. Framed as a second frame of the screen, the window is like a screen within a screen; the viewer seems to be able to enter the first screen, as if they were Ah-Ha's friends, holding their breath to see what is going on. Annoyed by the mainland's nagging, Ah-Ha unexpectedly pushes him, and then both groups start fighting. The tension between the mainland and Ah-Ha is obviously raised by ideological conflicts, as the former's patriotism is fuelled by a growing preoccupation with the Chinese national past and with the ideology he has been taught to remember, which is completely beyond the latter's comprehension. For Ah-Ha, the local soldiers' club is a place to play pool rather than to cultivate patriotism; for the mainland, the death of the late president is a national loss and deserving of national mourning as he is an image representing the Chinese national past. The ideological conflicts between them reach their height when Ah-Ha and his friends throw stones to break the door of the soldiers' club, suggesting that the

official version of history based on the Chinese national past has been questioned, and the patriotism fostered by the myth of Chinese identity has been challenged.

Sound has been widely employed in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, evoking emotional states and significantly contributing to political references. The live broadcast of the funeral of the late vice-president, which, emotionally and sadly, narrates the accomplishments in Mandarin, is in stark contrast to Ah-Ha's swearing in Taiwanese, when he is asked to properly observe the funeral. The broadcast in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is acknowledged, on more than one occasion, with a distinctly right-wing stamp, addressing the disturbing zones of recent history. For example, on the National Day when Ah-Ha's family are chewing sugarcane and chatting in their living room, the radio is broadcasting news of an air battle between Taiwan and China. The broadcast reports the heated battle, and propagandises how strong the Taiwanese air force is to defeat that of Communist China over Mazu Island.⁷ While the news continues, there is no discussion about this battle. It seems that nobody is disturbed by the news, as if they are used to the political tension between two countries.

The broad sweep of Hou's political concern, as well as the sense of political and social crisis, is hinted at in his use of sound. Throughout the film, the political issue has never been mentioned. Yet, in some ways, it is at the epicentre of the themes and issues, fully addressing the complexity and difficulty of the political situation in the 1950s. This political instability is explicitly expressed when a group of teachers talk about newspaper articles. A medium shot of a newspaper headline demands the viewer's attention, in which the military tension between Taiwan and China, and Chiang Kai-Shek's instruction to the national army to await orders, are reported. Rather than unnecessary conversation or fussy action, Hou uses a shot of coconut trees swinging in the background of blue sky, in which the chirping of grasshoppers is heard; he cuts to a shot of a group of people standing together, and then to a shot of the newspaper. A propaganda song is heard which urges, "Regain the mainland, which is our territory, and the people there are our compatriots," reflecting the social phenomenon of that era in which anti-Communist ideology was strongly implemented by the Nationalist government. At first glance, it seems that every shot is irrelevant, every composition static, and every cut plain. No action is exactly intended as a comment on another; no conversation leads particularly to the next shot, but the political instability of the 1950s is simply but clearly explained. Although it is the political turmoil which has been described, a feeling of tranquillity prevails through the images. That night, the noise of tanks rumbling past in the darkness is heard over the scene of Ah-Ha's family deeply sleeping. Except for the father who wakes up to look through the window, it seems that nobody is bothered by the thundering noise. The next scene is in the early morning, a muddy road with the tracks of tanks left the previous night, but it soon looks like another beautiful day with a shot of bright sunny morning. The ongoing political tension exists but does not shadow the younger generation's world.⁸

A Time to Live, A Time to Die moves slowly, with a small number of scenes, whose images appear simple on the surface, but can be seen an closer analysis to contain deeper meaning. Sound has been used remarkably as a narrative strategy to explore the wonder on that surface, and to mirror the emotional state of the

characters. For example, the sound of rain is particularly built around moments of intense emotion surrounding events like illness and separation to reflect the characters' sense of loss. In the first half of the film, Ah-Ha's father appears to be ill and weak from asthma and tuberculosis. The children, who seem to be remote from their father, hardly ask about his illness, nor panic when they see him vomiting blood, as if they are used to accepting his illness as a part of family life. However, when the doctor is sent for to see their father, their concern and fear for his health is revealed, as they all stand aside and look at him. The sound of heavy rain heard in the scene of the typhoon reflects the family members' worries of their father and their fear of losing him.

The rhythm of the raindrop in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is an essential theatrical device conveying a sense of poetic sentiment, an expression of subtle feelings towards a world in which life is constantly changing and does not allow everyone to interpret each moment in his own way. The day before the eldest sister's wedding, Ah-Ha's mother recounts the old days to her, stretching from her secret love affair, to her marriage, to the death of her second daughter. In the living room, an interior shot with extremely long take shows the mother and daughter sitting on *tatamis*, the former showing the latter the family heirloom and photographs.⁹ A nostalgic sadness is evoked in this scene when the mother starts to narrate that she had a secret crush on her colleague but dared not to tell her parents; she was worried about her husband's emaciated health and the poverty of the family after the marriage; she was nagged by her mother-in-law for having two daughters in a row, and was urged to adopt a baby boy for a good luck;¹⁰ and she regrets that she did not take good care of the second daughter, who died of food-poisoning. The mother's reminiscence of the past is completely shot in one take; the camera never moves, holding long enough at the same angle to allow the atmosphere to brim over with the mother's sorrow and sadness, while Ah-Ha's eldest sister listens, remaining silent until her mother sobs at the end of her story.¹¹ This is a quiet, sentimental moment, and only the pouring rain outside the window is heard. Silence and emptiness often appear in Hou's films, they are treated as though they are audible sounds and tangible objects. Responding quietly to her mother's narration of her past, the eldest daughter's silence is quite subtle here, a rather good mean by which to express her share of her mother's feelings; the sound of rain actively arouses emotional upsurge, spreading the atmosphere of sorrow in a subdued manner surrounding the mother and the daughter, for the memories of the past, and also for the latter's impending departure to get married.

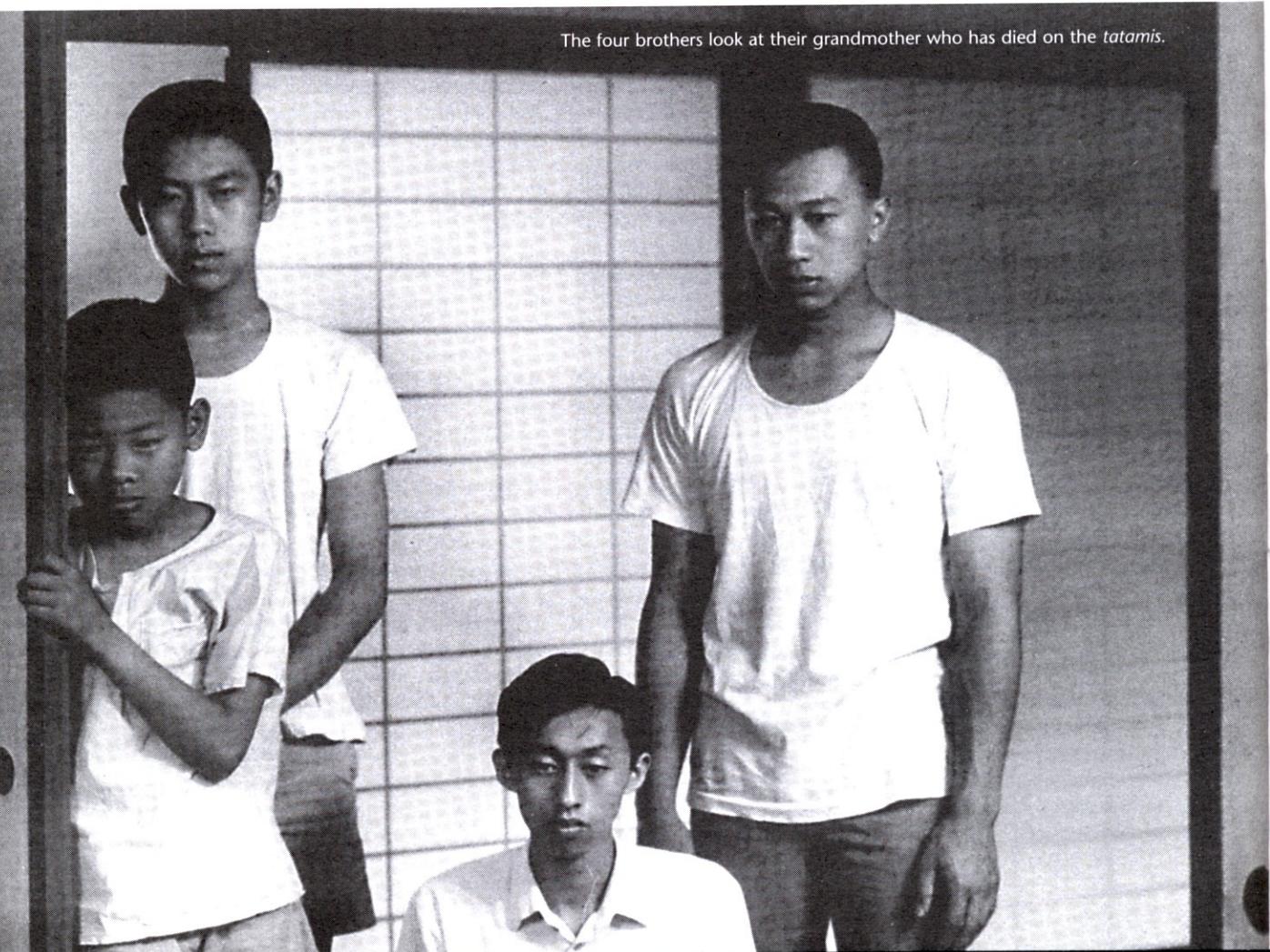
The sound of rain dropping on the roof or flipping upon windows marks the sense of silence in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, giving it form and meaning. When Ah-Ha causes trouble for his tutor and is nearly expelled from school, his sister is sent for to talk to the dean of students. In the shot, Ah-Ha is sitting and looking at the camera while in the background the sister and the dean of students discuss how to discipline him. Ah-Ha says nothing, not even defending himself. In the next shot, Ah-Ha sees his sister off, and then remains silent, walking noiselessly to the bicycle parking lot. It is raining heavily outside, and rain drops rhythmically on the tin awning. Ah-Ha finds his tutor's bike, and stabs its front wheel with a screwdriver. He calmly leaves, gradually disappearing in the pathway. The sound of rain renders Ah-Ha's silence electric, and is

much more meaningful than anything Ah-Ha could have said to interpret his rebellious youth.

Apart from the use of sound which is very emotionally charged in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, empty shots are frequently found in other moments. Kathe Geist defines empty shots as "empty of identified characters, as transitions between scenes and sometimes as interludes within them."¹² As Chae points out, Hou's empty shot, in which the characters are absent and a certain place is focused with a static camera movement, forms a narrative in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* to link the emotional development of sequences. The night when Ah-Ha's father dies, the power supply is cut off, and the screen turns black for a few seconds. The eldest daughter finds out that the father is dead when she lights a candle in his study. In the second half of the film, when the mother goes to the local hospital for the last time, Ah-Ha and his brother help her to get into a pedicab, and then there is a cut to the shot of the moving pedicab in the background. The camera remains even after the pedicab has left the screen, leaving only the empty road in the rain, as if to suggest the mother will never come back. She dies that night. At the end of the film, Hou again inserts an empty shot to imply the grandmother's death, by framing the stool beside the tea table where she had often sat. The camera shot then moves backward to the *tatamis* on which the grandmother stiffly lies, while the details of her death are narrated.¹³ This kind of empty shot forms a unique narrative style in Hou's films,

conveying a sort of resigned sadness, as well as a calm acceptance of the unpredictable shift from life to death. Also, the empty shot stimulates the viewer's understanding of the scene, which appears empty and static but contains implicit meaning. For example, the father's empty chair is framed in the film's opening shot to imply the family's memory of him. The remembrance of his father sitting in front of his desk working on the paperwork he brought home is Ah-Ha's deepest memory of him. This chair in his study thus "becomes a symbol of his physical absence and memories about him" as he dies when Ah-Ha is still a young boy.¹⁴ As Hou mentions at the beginning of his narration, this film is about his childhood, especially the memory of his father, but this sounds unmotivated as the father is barely present, nor does he seem close to his children. However, it is later understood that it is his fear of infecting them with his tuberculosis that makes him keep his distance from them.¹⁵ The chair is left empty after his father's death, yet it fulfills Hou's impression of his father, and of his time with his father. The empty chair is filled with memory; emptiness is, in a sense, a kind of fullness. It is interesting to find out that the fathers in all Hou's early films are weak: the father in *The Boys from Fengkuei* is an imbecile; the one in *A Summer at Grandpa's* just shows up twice to pick up his children; in *Dust in the Wind* the father is a disabled miner; in *Daughter of the Nile* he is an injured policeman. Contrasted with the image of the mother, which is tough and strong, that of the father sketched in Hou's films is

The four brothers look at their grandmother who has died on the *tatamis*.



powerless, which indicates that his childhood memory of his own father, who was physically ill, shaped the representation of fathers in the films.

Generally speaking, Hou's long shots are filled with deep, untapped feelings that evoke a nostalgia towards the past. When Ah-Ha gives his first love letter to May, the camera shot frames both of them in the centre, and then cuts to Ah-Ha's point-of-view shot, of looking at May leaving, and afterwards remains focused on her back until she is hardly seen in the distance. Following Ah-Ha's point-of-view shot, the audience share a deep sense of loss as if they were Ah-Ha himself, gazing at May disappearing at the end of street, evoking an intense, nostalgic sadness connected with memories of youth and the vanishing of a world which used to be lived so intensely. Ah-Ha's *gang-fight*, his first experience in the red light district, or his harassment of a cloth vendor: all these everyday activities are shot to form a rhythm of life, drawing the viewer's attention to experience of the landscape of Ah-Ha's past. Indeed, Hou attempts to oblige the viewer's historical consciousness to return to an era which no longer exists. This is obvious in one scene in which the eldest sister's friends come to visit, and one of them proposes to take a picture for the family: grandmother, mother and Ah-Ha join the daughter and her friends in the front yard, and everybody smiles and looks at the camera. Hou's camera shot freezes at this moment while the colour of the image becomes yellow as if an old picture were being presented on the screen. The freezing of this shot, which produces the effect of a photograph, is the freezing of a historical moment, encouraging the viewer to meditate upon the meaning of history, and to think of the history that separates the observer and the observed. The understanding of historical transformation through the 1950s to the late 1960s is poignantly reflected by the Ah-Ha's attitudes towards the deaths of his father, mother, and grandmother. From the panicking fear, to great sorrow, and then to calm acceptance, Hou seems to think optimistically that a new historical era is about to start, as the old generation has gradually passed away. In the last few shots of the film, his grandmother dies on the tatamis without being discovered until her body start to rot. Ah-Ha and his brothers all stand still looking at their grandmother until the undertakers arrive. One of the undertakers gives the brothers a dirty look, as if to accuse of them neglecting their grandmother. For the last shot, in which the four brothers' gaze for a long time at their grandmother's corpse, it looks as though they return a gaze to the camera, as if they are looking at the audience; the Taiwanese film critic Chen Kuo-Fu comments that it is the younger generation's witnessing of the passing of the previous century. *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is a film about historical and national memory; this film finds its viewpoint in history, and returns it to the audience.¹⁶ History is constituted only if it is considered; it is regained only if it is looked at.¹⁷ Seeing history projected on the screen, the audience becomes the object of history's gaze, and is expected to think about the meaning of history and its related issues.

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1 Hakka people, who speak Hakka dialect, are one of the main ethnic communities among Taiwanese, Chinese mainlanders, and Aboriginals in contemporary Taiwan. The Hakkas originated from central China but gradually migrated further south towards the southeast coastline, such as Guangdong,

Guangxi, Hunan provinces and Taiwan. In the late Qing dynasty (after 1867 A.D.), the Hakkas moved to Hainan island, Taiwan and overseas to flee from wars. See the website: www.asiawind.com/hakka/history/htm. The "Chinese mainlanders" refer to the Chinese who moved to Taiwan after 1945, when Taiwan was handed over by Japan to Chiang Kai-Shek's Chinese Nationalist government. The "typical Taiwanese" generally refer to those whose ancestors had moved to Taiwan mainly from Fujian province since the seventeenth century. In *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, Ah-Ha's parents who are Hakkas from Guangdong province and move to Taiwan after 1945, are generally regarded as Chinese Hakkas.

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1991, pp.187-190. The Middle Kingdom refers to China, which means "the centre of the world". Anderson suggests that Cheng Ho's voyages far across the Indian ocean in the fifteenth century, which were carried out at the orders of the Yung-lo Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, were rare events in Chinese history that were intended to enforce a court monopoly of external trade with Southeast Asia and the region further west, *against the depredations of private Chinese merchants*.

3 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.187. The way that the Chinese renamed Taiwanese cities is similar to the Europeans who had begun to name places in their colonies with new versions of old toponyms in their lands of origin.

4 Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* is based on a real story that happened in 1961, when a high school student in Taipei killed a fourteen-year-old girlfriend. A richly layered world of the 1960s is built in this film through Yang's portrait of rebellious teenagers mired in night school and lost in gang activities, of the popularity of American rock music spreading in Taipei, of the mainlanders' remaining detachment from Taiwan having retreated from mainland China over ten years, and of a repressive bureaucratic system constraining social development. Yang points out that what he is interested in exploring in this film is not the murder itself, but rather the environment in which the teenage homicide happened. Politically disciplined and socially reserved, the portrayal of the 1960s in *A Brighter Summer Day* is repressive and constrained, as Yang's retrospective view is mainly focused on the community of mainlanders, who are not sure if they could return to mainland China, but do not feel confident living in Taiwan. As a second generation mainland, Yang provides another profile of mainlanders in Taiwan, who were simply ordinary people living at the edge of society with the haunting memory of the Chinese civil war. Huang Jien-Yeh, *The Films of Edward Yang*, Taipei: Yuang-Lieu, 1995, pp.159-162. See also Shelly Kraicer and Lisa Roosen-Runge, "Edward Yang: A Taiwanese Independent Filmmaker in Conversation," *CineAction*, no. 47, 1998, pp. 48-55. In contrast to Yang's concern with Chinese mainlanders, Wu Nien-Jen focuses on the Taiwanese who had experienced the Japanese colonisation and later the Chinese Nationalist regime in his first film, *A Borrowed Life*, which is in memory of his father. After being a screenplay writer for many years, Wu shot *A Borrowed Life* in 1994, in which the history of post-war Taiwan is widely shared with the Taiwanese people's struggling between different identities imposed by different ruling authorities. Hsieh Zen-Ch'ang, "An Interview with Wu Nien-Jen," *Film Appreciation*, no.71, Sep/Oct 1994, Taipei, pp.51-57.

5 Pierre Nora, "La nation-mémoire," in *Les lieux de mémoire II*, 3, p.653, quoted in Naomi Greene's *Landscape of Loss: The National Past in Post-war French Cinema*, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 1999, p.24.

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, London: The Athlone Press, 1986, p.2, mentioned by Tony Barta in "Screening the Past: History Since the Cinema," *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, Westport: Praeger, 1998, p.10.

7 Mazu Island is a part of Taiwan's territory, and is very near to Fujian province, the south-east of China.

8 Youn-Jeong Chae also discusses the relationship between the political references and the lives of the characters in his Ph.D thesis, *Film Space and the Chinese Visual Tradition*, New York: New York University, 1997, p.135.

9 Tatamis are thick Japanese mats made of straw, which are laid in order on the floor on which people sit and eat.

10 The older generation believes that the adoption of a boy would be a good sign to bring the family a boy, and that of a girl brings a girl.

11 Chae has a similar analysis of this scene in *Film Space and the Chinese Visual Tradition*, p.132.

12 Kathe Geist, "Narrative Strategies in Ozu's Late Films," in *Reframing Japanese Cinema*, eds., David Desser and Author Nolletti, Jr., Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p.92.

13 Chae, *Film Space and the Chinese Visual Tradition*, pp. 129-130.

14 ibid: p.128.

15 This point is also mentioned by Chae in *Film Space and the Chinese Visual Tradition*, pp. 127-129.

16 Chen Kuo-Fu, "A Time to Live, A Time to Die: The Memory of History", *Lien-He Daily News*, August 14, 1985. Taipei.

17 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993, p.65.

THE HALFWAY HOUSE OF MEMORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Hirokazu Kore-eda

by Gabriel M. Paletz

interpreter Ayako Saito

Hirokazu Kore-eda's first film, *Lessons from a Calf* (1991), ends with a resonant shot of empty space. Only a floorboard remains of a cow's stall, from when the fifth graders of Ina Elementary School cared for the animal. The image commemorates a year now without trace, except in the film and in the schoolchildren's minds. The shot typifies the director's perspective in his nine documentaries and three features. His works reveal the dual nature of memory. Memories can fuse individual experiences, and embody the loss of shared time. The characters in Kore-eda's films straddle losses with memories, that both shadow and give impetus to life.



Critics have typed Kore-eda as a director concerned with memory. His internationally known films display memory's importance to individual identities and relationships. The documentary *Without Memory* (1996) examines how Hiroshi Sekine and his family cope with his inability to recall most events beyond an hour. Kore-eda's three fiction films all deal with memory's compelling and elusive quality. *Maborosi* (1995) follows one woman's cycle of grief and recuperation following her husband's suicide. In *After Life* (1998), the recently deceased are required to choose one memory to take with them into eternity. And *Distance* (2001), Kore-eda's most recent work, shows four people facing remembrances of their spouses and relatives who joined a cult, and committed mass suicide.

The conventional analysis of Kore-eda as a "memory" director, however, ignores two distinctive aspects of his work. First, the director's concern with memory allows him to explore a number of subjects and film styles. *Lessons from a Calf* portrays a year in the lives of the elementary schoolchildren. Kore-eda's second film is also a documentary, titled *But—in the Time of Government Aid Cuts* (1991). It examines a different issue and social milieu: the consequences of government welfare policy to an official within the system and to a woman who depended on welfare assistance. Kore-eda's two documentaries on Yutaka Hirata examine Hirata's life as the first man in Japan to state he contacted AIDS through sex. All the documentaries blend memory into portraits of various public institutions and people. The second distinctive aspect of Kore-eda's work applies to his evocation of memory in his fiction films. As the director observes in the interview, he neither instructs his actors how to express emotion, nor does he use conventional flashbacks to appeal to audience sympathies. The director has transposed his background in documentary into innovative fiction films. Kore-eda's original treatment of memory parallels his breadth of subjects and film styles.



10.

We met Kore-eda in the offices of his production company, TV Man Union, in the Shibuya district of Tokyo, in August of last year. The interview took place on Saturday, with the offices deserted. The director himself made tea for us during the four-and-a-half hour talk. The intervals between questions and replies were extended by translations, and by his deep concentration, as he kept his promise "to give a good interview." Born in 1962, Kore-eda, like his character Mochizuki in *After Life*, has the thoughtfulness of a much older man. His consideration also gave way to moments of playfulness, when he borrowed the interviewer's pencil to draw the flag in *After Life*, and the positions of the two cameramen in the film.

Hirokazu Kore-eda spoke about his start making TV documentaries, the influence of Hou Hsiao-Hsien on his work, his career bridging documentary and narrative, and the productions of his films, from his first documentary to his latest feature, *Distance*. The filmography below provides the plots of the movies discussed in the interview.

GP – What brought you into documentary filmmaking, after graduating from Waseda University in literature?

HK – In Japanese universities, even though you're a literature major, you may not be following literary studies. I wanted to be a novelist, but immediately after entering university, I basically dropped out of classes. There are many movie theatres around the Waseda University area, so I started going to see films. I became particularly aware of the director's presence in Japanese films. I grew more and more interested.

After graduating, I wanted to find work related to filmmaking, but the old studios were already in decline, and there was hardly any chance to find an industry job. There were and are three ways to get involved in film production in Japan. One is to become a porn director. Another is to start in independent, amateur filmmaking. The third way is to go into commercial TV production, which I thought would be the venue for realizing what I wanted to do.

GP – You accomplish what you want to do, even when it doesn't seem likely. As an assistant TV director, you went off secretly to shoot your first film [*Lessons from a Calf*].

HK – Yes, that's how it happened. But you must realize that unlike the U.S. or even Korea, where there are many film schools for would-be directors, in Japan hardly any exist. Anyone interested in filmmaking has to find his or her own way to begin. Directors of my age have entirely

Without Him

different backgrounds. That's one of the advantages of my filmmaking generation. And Japanese directors also fill many roles. Shinji Aoyama, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Ryosuke Hashiguchi and I commonly write, direct, and edit.

When I started in TV documentaries, editing was part of my work. So it was natural for me to edit my own films. With *Maborosi*, I started by collaborating with another editor. But I found it frustrating not to have complete control. After that I decided, whether for a feature or a documentary, to edit alone. It's natural to me, even though it isn't in either the Japanese or U.S. studio system. In Japan, it was even an aesthetic concern to leave the material to the editor. Modern Japanese cinema may reflect both the advantages and disadvantages of one person writing, shooting, and editing a film. For example, after three months, I got lost in editing *After Life*. So I let the footage sit for a month, to get distance on it. Some kind of distance is always needed. Sometimes I bring people who aren't involved in filmmaking into the editing room, and they're helpful. They reflect the views of the potential audience.

GP – Do you think these circumstances cause Japanese directors to have strong personalities?

HK – The fact is, not having had the chance to study





directing, I learn how to make films each time I create. It's trial and error—probably the best school.

GP – Are there other filmmakers to whom you feel close?

HK – There are many. *Maborosi* was my first feature. And I think it's a patchwork of scenes I really liked from films by Eric Rohmer, Theo Angelopoulos, and Victor Erice. *Maborosi*, for me, gathers favorite images from my favorite directors, though I paid close attention to its style and techniques.

GP – You made a TV documentary on Hou Hsiao Hsien and Edward Yang. How have they influenced your work?

HK – In my mind Hou Hsiao Hsien is a big influence. I had seen all of his films and really liked them. I met Hou making that TV program in 1993. He was filming *The Puppet Master*, and thinking about what it means to be Taiwanese. He's still dealing with questions of identity, trying to figure out where the Taiwanese come from and where they should go. Edward Yang also, although in his own way.

When I was making the documentary about Hou and Yang, I watched them and thought, Are there any Japanese directors dealing with these questions? And that was my starting point. If I hadn't met Hou in 1993, I would probably have continued making films, but not with my current preoccupations.

And after seeing *Maborosi*, Hou said to me, "Filming is wonderful. Technically, it's perfect. But cinema has something to do with how you film the subject. It's not something that you decide like composition, where you design everything and then just put the subject there. Film comes from the subject itself. You've made documentaries, you know what this means." Hou's reaction was one of the reasons my filmmaking changed after *Maborosi*. I changed one hundred and eighty degrees in my second feature, and again in my third. Now I try not to select a style for a film; I decide as I go along.

I have a plan and a destination in mind, but the most interesting projects are the ones that elude it. The work I find most appealing deviates from its starting point. Where there's a discrepancy, I get more involved and the work becomes more engrossing.

GP – What were the films where this occurred?

HK – The first time I experienced this excitement was while making [his second film, the documentary] *But—in the Time of Government Aid Cuts*. Initially, the program was going to deal with the problem of social welfare, and the question of welfare policy. But as I went on investigating, I became more interested in the government official who committed suicide. The initial focus on welfare moved to one on human weakness. That's when I felt that there was something to documentary. It was a very formative experience.

GP – Lessons from a Calf focuses on an elementary school; *But—in the Time of Government Aid Cuts* deals with government policy. *August Without Him* examines Hirata's AIDS case, and *Without Memory* looks at malpractice and Sekine's memory disease. More than your narrative films, your documentaries address institutions and physical conditions.

HK – In documentary, you begin with social and political issues, or medical problems. The issues lead to more abstract questions. Narrative films, like my features, can start with the abstract questions. That may be a difference between documentary and narrative.

GP – In 1993 you directed one documentary on Yutaka Hirata's year of coming out with AIDS. What inspired you to do a second documentary on him [August Without Him]?

HK – The first documentary was made while he was still alive, the second after his death. After the first one was finished, Hirata and the film crew (not just me) felt the relationship between us, developed during the shoot, hadn't ended. There was a support group for Hirata-San, consisting of pretty well known people. But he and the group didn't get along, and he broke with them. He hated being alone, understandably so in his condition. The crew couldn't just leave him. That was the impetus for continuing to film.

Hirata was a difficult character, very lovable, but selfish and demanding. He saw through people, and got them involved in his life. *August Without Him* shows his relationship with the crew. He asked us to film him until he died. But when he was

dying in the hospital, he asked me to keep visiting, yet not to film anymore. That was difficult because, for the crew, there was a great difference between being Hirata's volunteers and shooting the documentary. The film shows our dilemma. The film also embarrasses me a bit, as it reflects less Hirata-San as the documentary's subject than my own feelings of loss.

I'm not so interested in death itself, as the survivors of a loss who face what remains. To me, the image of people confronting the death of loved ones can be beautiful. They have to face death in order to continue living. They have to decide whether to keep memories once shared, or to erase the past. My greatest theme, in documentary and narrative, is how people overcome the violence of a loss, and deal with memories that now exist only on one side. I'm among the survivors in *August Without Him*.

GP – Without Memory also seems a key film in your career, connecting memory, loss and identity.

HK – I agree. The research and interviews for it made me realize memory is fundamental to identity. The documentary shows what my interests are.

GP – At the end of the film, you say that maybe Hiroshi Sekine's identity does not depend on his own memories. And in After Life the character Mochizuki realizes, "I was part of someone else's happiness."

HK – When I made the documentary on Ina Elementary School [his first film, *Lessons from a Calf*], I visited there for about three years, became friends with the schoolchildren, etc. A teacher said to me: "I'm very glad you like my class and students, and that you visit. But this place belongs to us. Maybe it's better for you to find your own place."

The question haunted me. Whenever I shoot films, and begin pre-production, I enter somebody else's space and world for a limited time. When the production's over, I leave. After the teacher's words I wondered, "Where is my place?" While I was filming Sekine-San, I began to think that maybe I don't have a particular, concrete place. But by researching and interviewing, I shared some time and memories with him. Instead of a physical location, my place is then in Sekine's mind. I may find my identity through a shoot, by building relationships with subjects of a documentary. Let me illustrate.

[The director makes a pencil drawing of intertwined ovals:]



There are two rings of memories: one from Sekine, the other from me. The design shows joined identities. It's on the flag of the institution in *After Life*. And it has other possible meanings, like reels of film. The similarity between Sekine-San in *Without Memory* and Mochizuki-San in *After Life* lies in the discovery of shared spaces and identities, through memory.

GP – Without Memory was shot right before After Life. They have other similarities. Both Sekine in the documentary and old Watanabe in the feature watch videos of their lives to jog their memories.

HK – I wasn't aware of that. Now that you say it, though, it's interesting. It's true the two films deal with the same themes, but the basic story of *After Life* was written in 1988 [ten years before the film was shot]. The situation of watching videos is in the original script.

In the screenplay, the focus was originally on the two men, Mochizuki and Watanabe, and on the woman who was Mochizuki's fiancée and became Watanabe's wife. It was a love triangle. The original story ended with Watanabe-San choosing the image of himself and his wife together, while the wife chose the image of herself and Mochizuki. The original script ends at about two-thirds through the completed film. The changes in Mochizuki were triggered from my experiences making *Without Memory*, and the questions from my ten years of work, of what it means to create TV programs and films.

GP – Mochizuki chooses a shot-reverse shot as his memory: himself, and his colleagues filming him. Does his choice reflect the discovery from your documentaries, about your sense of place?

HK – Yes. I felt I had found one answer to what it means to make films.

The discovery about a person's place applies to me, to Sekine in *Without Memory*, and to both Mochizuki and [his female colleague] Shiori in *After Life*. Before Mochizuki's departure, Shiori sees herself as part of the crew filming him, in his memory on the screen. Like Mochizuki, Shiori finds her place as part of someone else's memory and happiness. Mochizuki gave her the chance, for the first time, to face her own identity. It is her starting point to lead her own life at the institution. In that sense, *After Life* ends in the future tense. But for Shiori to gain her awareness, she has to lose Mochizuki. Awareness of her place comes from a shared memory, and her experience of loss. So I don't consider the end as either pessimistic or optimistic, but as the start of her growth. Growth means a series of losses and gains.

GP – Yumiko in Maborosi reaches a similar stage.

HK – That's right—and the characters in *Distance*: all the features end with open futures.

GP – You are known as a filmmaker concerned with memory. But there are other ways to characterize your films, for example as documentary diaries.

HK – As for memory—I just like it. It's not that I deliberately seek to make films about it. But when told, I recognize the finished films are concerned with showing both memory's effects and its absence. Perhaps one reason is that particular subjects have a close affinity to film, like memory, murder, or photography. My films are not the only ones concerned with memory. It's something to do with the medium itself.

From your question, I recognize the diary aspect of my films. And I'll give you a couple of illustrations from *After Life*. The film had two cinematographers: Masayoshi Sukita and Yutaka Yamazaki. I initially thought more of Sukita-San's footage would be in the film. He shot the videos of old Watanabe's life, as well as the two memories we see projected. However, almost all the scenes of the dead people's memories being recreated, like the rest of the picture, were shot by Yamazaki-San. I used Yamazaki's footage not for aesthetic, but



for narrative reasons. Both of them filmed the recreations. But while Sukita-San was shooting, Yamazaki-San filmed him. So Sukita-San became a performing cinematographer. And the people in the conference room who discuss how to recreate the memories also aren't actors. They're the art crew.

There was hardly any time left between the interviews and the production of the memories. The art staff had made the set for the memory of the man who flies in a Cessna plane. But he said, "No, it's not right." He insisted they correct the clouds. The art staff asked, "Make it easy on us. The plane's ready..." We postponed shooting for a day. The art crew complained, since people usually weren't that demanding. It was funny, and I think really adds to the film. The detail was part of the man's memory. And I could film the crew's real, pressing situation. So documentary scenes of the production became part of the narrative.

GP – In *Without Memory*, we first see Sekine trembling at his condition, followed by shots of fish, herbs, and a clock. The shots contrast his lack of memory with diary-like, everyday details.

HK – At the time, I was thinking of how to represent the daily space of his home. There are two kinds of time in the film. I discussed with the cameraman how to contrast the sense of time flowing in everyday space, with time which does not flow inside Sekine's mind.

GP – *Maborosi* combines a similar everyday quality with Yumiko's exceptional grief. You linger on her as she cleans the stairs—an irrelevant scene for Hollywood films.

HK – Even here, many people, including the producer, told me that those scenes were not necessary. I was asked so many

times, "Why do you keep those shots of eating and cleaning so long?" I understand people's position, but they let me keep them. My answer was that these small, everyday details are not important to the film, but are the most important things for Yumiko. She needed a long period of time in order to reach the scene where she expresses her feelings. That's why I retained them.

Stylistically, *Maborosi* is an elaborate and non-realistic film. But in Yumiko's mind-scheme, I wanted to make it real. Little events built up in everyday life are essential to her.

GP – *Maborosi* has a striking style in representing daily life. The film rarely uses narrative conventions to generate emotion, such as dialogue or close-ups.

HK – One of the first things I decided for the film was how to express Yumiko's feelings of loss without close-ups. I found the location in Noto by the sea, where she expresses her grief to her second husband. I wanted to convey the emotion in that scene by the movement of the two characters, and the distance between them.

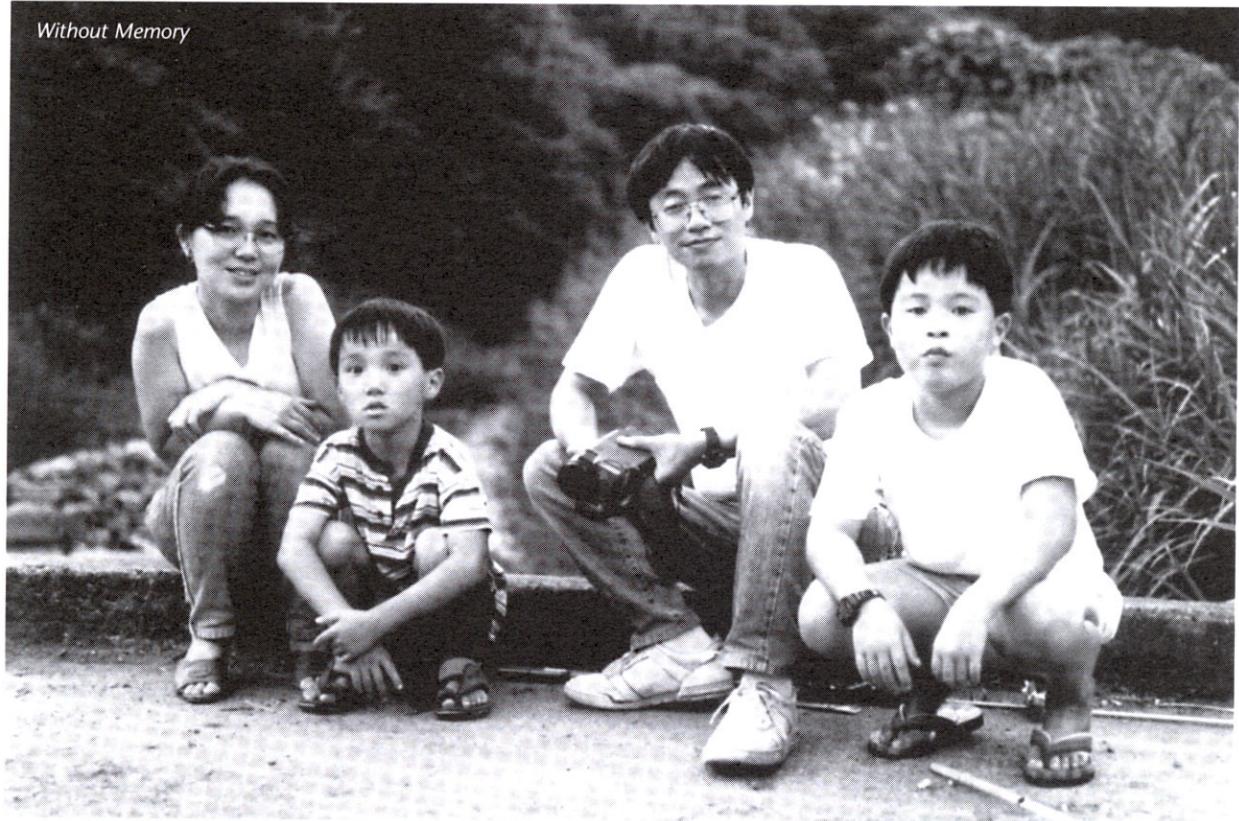
GP – Changes in the weather also embody Yumiko's feelings, and convey the flow of time.

HK – From the start to the end of filming took a year and a half. But the actual days of shooting were only a month and a half. We shot by the seasons: for summer, winter, etc. The sequence where the two children seem to run from winter to spring is one of my favorites in the film. The transitions were not planned; I just followed them as they moved around.

GP – How did you get the shot of the snow in the funeral procession?

HK – Around that time I took photographs with a 50mm

Without Memory



lens, and wanted to use the experience. I storyboarded the film. But there was no snow in the storyboard for the funeral. That day, the weather was very variable, and it snowed just when we started to shoot. The snow came towards us on the wind from the ocean. That shot was a miracle.

With the funeral, I feel I might have escaped to the realm of fable. I don't know whether giving the impression of a fable there was a good choice for the film, instead of confronting Yumiko's rebirth in a more realistic way, with everyday details. For while the color, lighting, weather, and costumes in *Maborosi* are not realistic, they look natural. For example, Yumiko does not wear black, but dark blue that photographs as a beautiful black.

I wanted the film to have a more European cinematography. I wanted natural lighting and color, and tried very hard to control those aspects. You're always curious where the light comes from in classical Japanese studio movies. Indirect lighting is hardly used; it's artificial. I deliberately used artificial lighting for the projected memories of Mochizuki and his fiancée in *After Life*. Those scenes, shot by Sukita-San, have a different look from the rest of the film shot by Yamazaki-San, where we used natural lighting as in *Maborosi*.

Maborosi's color was also quite carefully planned. In the first half of the film, the main tone is green. So Yumiko and Ikuo [her first husband] even paint the bicycle green. In the second half, as Yumiko recovers from Ikuo's suicide, there are images of light, and the main color is orange. But when Yumiko is obsessed with death for the second time, we took out all the color, and the main tone is mono. Red comes into it, to signify a kind of danger. I knew I was going to use the color white

only for the wedding, and in the last scene. Yumiko's white at the end doesn't mean her mourning is over. It actually starts there, after she expresses her grief. There is an elaborate color scheme through the film, and color is used symbolically.

GP – In the last scene, Yumiko wears white, and also a shirt and skirt like she wore as a child. Her clothes look natural, yet are part of the film's patterns.

HK – You have a good eye. Everything in the film is repeated twice. And it starts with a dream, so it should end with one. Perhaps the scene where she wears clothes from childhood may be the starting point of the second dream. That just occurred to me, to complete the film's circle.

GP – In your work with actors, it's said that you told Makiko Esumi in *Maborosi* to express her own grief, rather than to understand [the character] Yumiko's.

HK – I think she is marvelous in the film. But I didn't ask her to express her own feelings; just to face those emotions inside herself. That's my fundamental way of dealing with actors. When I ask performers to express, they tend to explain. Making documentaries, you don't tell people to express. So I don't ask actors to do so in features. I explain to them the conditions in which the characters find themselves, and what has led to the current situation: for instance, in the scene between the teacher and his wife on the balcony in *Distance*.

They talk for about ten minutes. And when I shot this ten-minute long take, I gave the two actors the background: that the couple had met in a university education circle, etc. I told the actor playing the husband to ask the wife to join the cult. And I told the actress playing the wife to answer that she wanted to continue her present life. I also asked the actor, without

letting the actress know, to use the phrase: "You've changed." He could use it anywhere, and in any way. But the phrase should come out in trying to persuade her, so that after he leaves, the words should haunt her. Those were my instructions. I don't feel that long takes encourage identification and sympathy. I used them in *Distance* because the dialogue was hardly fixed. The long take was a way to observe how the performers would create. I give the actors information, but don't ask them to represent the characters' feelings. The generation of emotion is up to them.

GP – *Distance* is your first feature to be set in clearly modern Japan. And it's the first to use flashbacks.

HK – You got what I intended to do. I wanted to make a narrative film starting with a documentary approach. And as we said, for documentaries, the starting point is some current social problem or question. That's one thing.

Secondly, I've always avoided flashbacks, as memories presented in real images. Previously I've shown memories as discourse, in words or in the recreations of *After Life*. The reason for avoiding concrete images from the past is that to make a documentary, my basic stance is not to express what's inside a subject. Documentaries should try to reveal the inside by showing the outside. The recent film *Memento* deals with Sekine-San's kind of memory disease. It tries to recreate Sekine's condition by using a first-person narrative. To me, a documentary shouldn't use the first person. Yet I thought for this narrative film I would challenge myself to show interior images from the past, to express people's feelings. These are the two themes I felt when making *Distance*, although they may sound contradictory.

GP – Even though we see what the characters remember, we're still removed from them.

HK – That's how I wanted to use the flashbacks. I could accept them only if they weren't to gain sympathy, the conventional use of first-person memories. None of the characters in the film identify with each other. The flashbacks are the kinds of memories they don't want to face.

GP – From *Lessons from a Calf* to *Distance*, your career blends documentary and narrative. How will the combination continue in your work?

HK – I want to continue my work along the same lines. What interests me now is to make something that can't be settled in one genre. I want to break down the categories of documentary, narrative, TV, and film. I think *Distance* already has this quality, as people have asked, "Can this be called a film?" and "I feel I shouldn't have seen it in a theatre." I want to create works that lead to some freedom, that go beyond definitions of cinema.

In the summer of 2001, Gabriel M. Paletz traveled on a film tour of Asia, whose results include this interview. He is currently Visiting Assistant Professor in the American Studies Program at William and Mary, working on a book about Orson Welles and American culture. Both his leisure and profession are dedicated to international film.

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Distance (2001)



Thanks to Professors Toril Moi and David L. Paetz, Michael Friend, Victor Fan, Despoina Theodorou and Ann Martin in the U.S. To Ayako Saito, Yuri Kobota, Aya Gotoh of TV Man Union, Yuka Sakano and Atsuko Fukuda of the Kawakita Film Foundation, Hiroshi Komatsu, and Hisashi Okajima of the National Film Center in Japan; and Susannah B.F. Paetz in both countries.

Filmography

Summaries written by Hirokazu Kore-eda for this interview are marked by (*).

1991 *Lessons from a Calf/The Other Education—The Education of One Class at Ina Elementary School* (47 minutes, video).

The documentary follows a year among the fifth graders at Ina Elementary School, who adopt a cow, Laura, caring for and becoming attached to her. At the end of the year, the schoolchildren decide, with regret, to return her to her farm.

This film was shot by Kore-eda from 1988 to 1991, and broadcast in May 1991, two months after the premiere of *But—In the Time of Government Aid Cuts*. Kore-eda considers *Lessons from a Calf* as his first work, although it was shown later. Readers interested in Kore-eda's career in the context of Japanese documentary films should see Aaron Gerow and Tanaka Junko's interview with the director in *Documentary Box* #13:

<http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/docbox/13/box13-1-e.html>.

1991 *But—in the Time of Government Aid Cuts/ However* (47 minutes, video).

The film began as a survey of government policy for health compensation. But it came to focus on the lives of two people. One, Mr. Toyonori Yamanouchi, was a compassionate bureaucrat in the Ministry of the Environment, who committed suicide over the government's refusal to compensate victims of polluted water. The documentary parallels the official's story with one of a woman of his generation, Ms. Nobuko Harajima. She worked as a hostess at a bar, and her lack of support from the government mirrors Yamanouchi's frustrations inside the system. The documentary includes interviews with Yamanouchi's stricken widow, whose grief inspired Kore-eda's first feature, *Maborosi*.

1992 *I Wanted to Be Japanese* (47 minutes, video)

The documentary traces the story of a Korean man who passed as Japanese for fifty years, but was then arrested as a suspected spy with a counterfeit passport. In its study of the man's life, the film pictures an oppressive Japanese society.*

1993 *When Cinema Reflects the Times—Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang* (47 minutes, video).

A documentary on the two Taiwanese filmmakers, including interviews with them and footage of their works; shot in Taiwan.

1993 *Four Times of Death* (45 minutes, video)

As in *Without Memory*, this documentary criticizes Japan's medical system. The film portrays how Japanese medicine focuses on the success of a transplant, rather than on a patient's life support after the operation. The lack of attention to life support care deprives kin of the time to come to terms with a family member's death.*

1993 *This is How I'm Living—One Year of Coming out with AIDS* by Yutaka Hirata (75 minutes, video)

Kore-eda's first documentary on Yutaka Hirata, the first Japanese man to declare publicly that he contracted AIDS from sex. It follows Hirata's visits to the hospital, and his canny treatment of people around him.

1993 *Soul Sketches—Every Person's Kenji Miyazawa* (45 minutes, video)

Kenji Miyazawa was a major Japanese poet, and writer of children's stories. His works depict the relationships between human beings and animals, plants, and minerals. The documentary examines ordinary people whose lives are tied to the worlds of plants, stars, and insects, mirroring Miyazawa's love of nature, and his career as a pioneer Japanese ecologist.*

1994 *August Without Him—Two Years of Living with AIDS* by Yutaka Hirata (78 minutes, video).

The second documentary on Yutaka Hirata, which follows the progress of his disease until his death. The film shows Hirata's interactions with the people who took care of him, and with the film crew. The documentary unfolds via Kore-eda's recollections of Hirata after the latter's death.

1995 *Maborosi* (110 minutes, 35 mm, color).

Kore-eda's first narrative feature. Mourning the suicide of her first husband in Osaka, the widow Yumiko moves to the village of Noto by the ocean. In a prearranged marriage with another man, she seems to recover her spirits. A return to Osaka, however, renews her grief. In winter she follows a funeral by the sea, and finally expresses her feelings of loss to her second husband. The film is based on a well-known short story by the Japanese writer Teru Miyamoto. Kore-eda was also inspired by the sorrow of Yamanouchi's widow from *But—In the Time of Government Aid Cuts*.

1996 *Without Memory* (84 minutes, video)

The documentary introduces Hiroshi Sekine and his devastating disease, Wernicke-Korsakoff's syndrome. Following hospital malpractice, Sekine cannot retain most events in his memory longer than an hour. Every morning he wakes up befuddled. He forgets and remembers that he suffers from the disease every day. The film exposes the crippling effects of his condition, but also shows how Sekine's family copes with his situation, as it investigates the forms of memory.

1998 *Wonderful Life/ After Life*

(118 minutes, 35 mm and 16 mm, color)

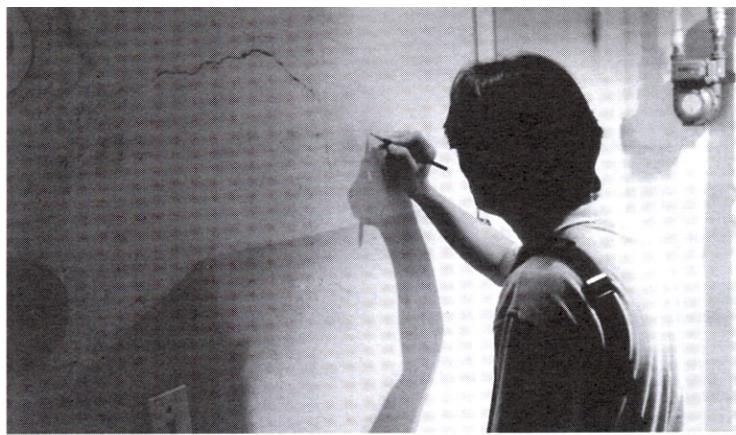
Kore-eda's second feature combines narrative and documentary footage on its own making (see above). A group of the recently deceased assembles at a complex where they are asked to choose one memory to take into eternity. They reflect on their lives, while the staff helps them in their decisions. Two members of the staff are Mochizuki, a young man who died in World War Two, and Shiori, a woman just out of her teens. Neither has aged, and neither has been able to choose a memory, so they have become workers at the complex.

Mochizuki handles the case of Mr. Watanabe, an old man of his own generation. Having trouble deciding on a memory, Watanabe screens his entire life on video. He chooses a moment with his wife on a bench in their old age, as his memory for eternity. Through his interaction with Watanabe, Mochizuki learns that his former fiancée became Watanabe's wife. Mochizuki discovers that the woman chose their last meeting before he went to war as her memory for eternity. Moved by his discovery that "I was a part of someone else's happiness," Mochizuki decides on a memory. He selects an image of himself being filmed by his colleagues, and passes into the after life. Mochizuki's departure upsets Shiori. But then she takes on Mochizuki's role, becoming the newest intermediary for the deceased and their memories.

2001 *Distance* (132 minutes, 35mm, color)

Kore-eda's third narrative feature. Three men and one woman are relatives of members of the apocalyptic cult, the Ark of Truth. They drive together into the woods to the cultists' former camp, to commemorate the third anniversary of the members' deaths. The cult killed a hundred people and committed mass suicide, events we do not see. At the campsite, the four relatives meet a member of the cult who survived. When their car is stolen, they are compelled to try to come to terms with both with the former cultist and their memories. The balcony scene discussed in the interview is a memory of the woman whose husband becomes a fanatical cult leader.

The group returns to the city by train. The former cultist questions one of the relatives about his identity: "Are you really [the brother of one of the women in the cult]...Because I hear her brother killed himself a few years ago." The brother cannot answer to prove his identity. Kore-eda's most challenging film, *Distance* continues the director's pre-occupations with identity, loss, and memory.

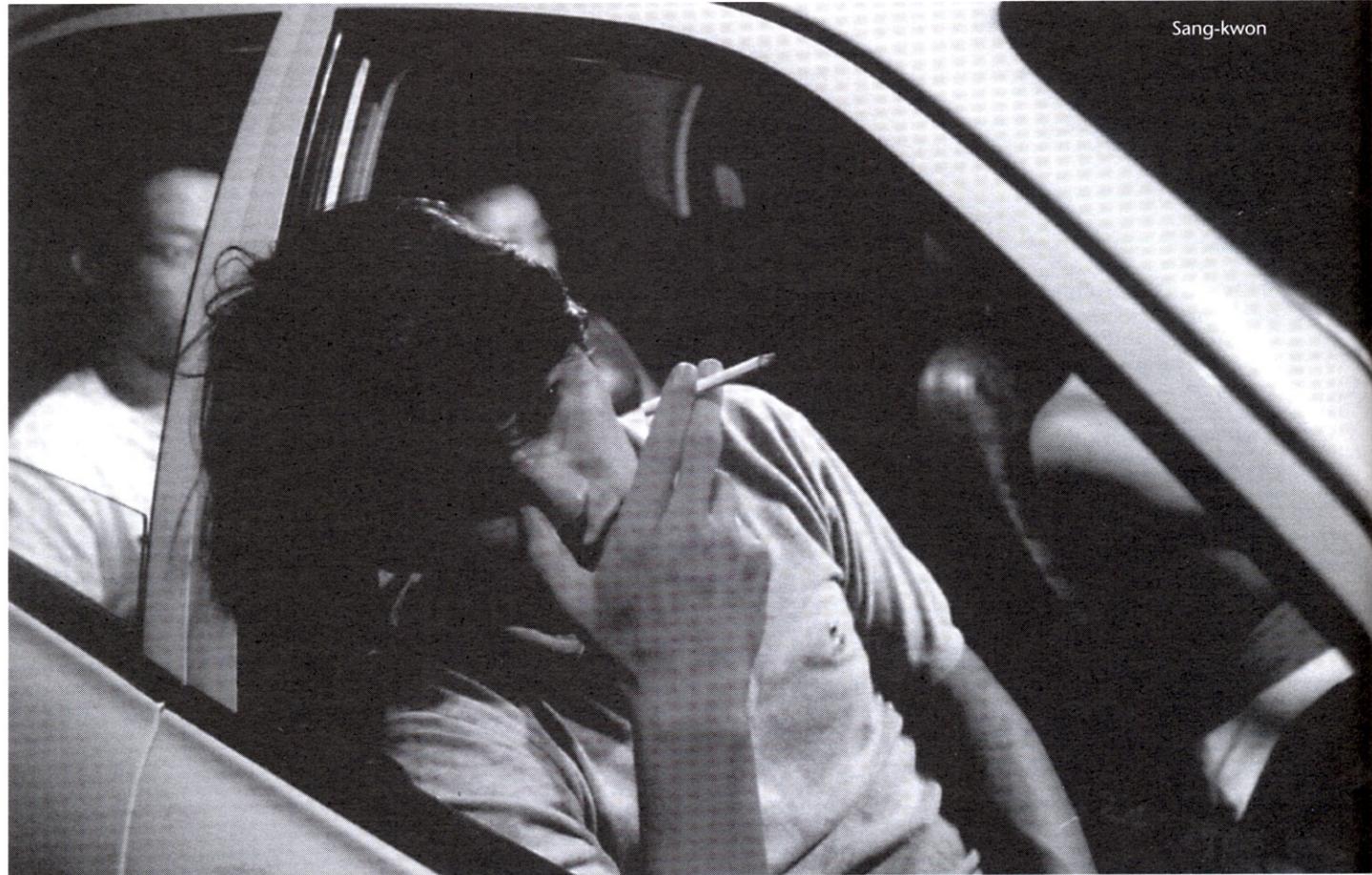


Sang-kwon writing on the wall.

South Korean Film Genres and Art-House Anti-Poetics

ERASURE AND NEGATION IN
THE POWER OF KANGWON PROVINCE

by David Scott Diffrient



Sang-kwon

At the end of *Les Mots et les choses*, his breathtaking tour through four centuries worth of epistemological structures and institutional practices, Michel Foucault ruminates on the possible outcome of the modern episteme. Since the nineteenth-century, "man" has been veering inexorably towards an ontological crisis in which his status as biological, economic, and philological actor has become obsolescent, eclipsed by the organizing principles comprising objective language. Just as the various classificatory schemas undergirding the rule-bound "soft sciences" (psychology, sociology and cultural history) reconfigured the vestiges of earlier epistemological structures, from the resemblance systems of Renaissance thought to Classical modes of representation, so too is knowledge "as we know it" faced with its own imminent negation. The final paragraphs of Foucault's text thus recast his earlier arguments about the recent invention of "man" in a grim, premonitory pallor, and speak of humankind being erased "like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."¹ Near the beginning of Hong Sang-soo's cryptic film *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), a seemingly trivial scene lends visual texture to this idea of erasure. Not long after her arrival to the Korean seaside resort Kangwon-do, Chi-suk, a twenty-two year-old college student, accompanies her schoolmates to a beach where she bends down and casually draws something in the sand. Perhaps her sketch is a message, a signature, maybe even a Foucauldian face awaiting its salty demise. Or perhaps it is simply an empty gesture, a mindless doodle to kill time. The ambiguity of her textual inscription is left intact thanks to the static camera's emphatic detachment from the proceedings. Should we construe this mark, this semiological riddle, as a new wrinkle in the fabric of post-structuralist subjectivity, an already poignant if quietly understated beach scene is unexpectedly imbued with significance—manifesting some of the textual and industrial tensions unique to a now-internationally acclaimed and generically promiscuous South Korean cinema through an act of *erasure*. Before the breaking surf rolls in to dissolve the sand-script, Chi-suk wipes away the image, robbing the spectator of a glimpse into this character's troubled psyche while setting an early precedent for other enigmatic, quickly erased compositions throughout the film.

This essay proposes a set of hypotheses around this fleeting moment in *The Power of Kangwon Province*, which not only foregrounds erasure as a kind of self-effacing authorial prerogative but also highlights an ostensibly non-generic "art-house" film's implicit connection to genre. Indeed,

taken as an example of the categorical impetus and imagery undergirding Foucault's text (tables, grids, classificatory charts, etc.—all of which contribute to the experience of order, which is "the writing of history itself"), *The Power of Kangwon Province* offers an illuminating case study of generic inversion at the end of the twentieth century. After contextualizing the film with reference to the industry's millennial drive toward genre diversification, I examine the many instances of erasure (both literal and figurative) throughout the film in hopes of pinpointing some of the thematic preoccupations of Hong Sang-soo. Hong is a filmmaker whose own authorial inclination throughout his seven-year directing and screenwriting career appears to be linked to graphological tropes (retracing and erasing) and the questioning of empirical knowledge, as well as the possibility of rendering positive the power of negation. Running parallel to the frequent moments of literal erasure in his films is the director's gravitation toward the "rubbing out" of generic taxonomies. By sprinkling semantic cues and iconographic elements throughout his texts only to blot them out in the end, Hong is able to subtly demonstrate the presence of absence (and vice-versa).

At first glance, the four films thus far comprising Hong's oeuvre have little in common with South Korea's mainstream, genre-based productions. *The Day a Pig Fell into a Well* (1996), *The Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000), and *Turning Gate* (2002) appear to be the minimalistic antitheses of such films as *Shiri* (1999), *Friend* (2001), *Champion* (2002), and *YMCA Baseball Team* (2002), so ensconced are the former in the niche market logic of film festival distribution that any attempt to align them with escapist blockbusters, gangster epics, biopics, and sports dramas is met with skepticism. Certainly, *The Power of Kangwon Province*, a personal project undertaken by a director known for his enigmatic yet stripped-down narratives and preference for neo-realistic location-shooting and non-professional actors, would seem to rebuke the formulaic constraints of commercial filmmaking. One of the goals of this essay is to cast in relief the problematic nature of such "either/or" binarism once mainstream genre productions and art-house "boutique" fare begin to slip from their antagonistically aligned positions and are shown to be in dialogue (if not communion) with one another. *The Power of Kangwon Province* alone dips into the semantic pools of the family melodrama, the murder mystery, the detective film, the police procedural, the buddy film, the youthpic, and the travelogue. Understood as a non-generic genre text, thisulti-

mately deconstructive film is an exemplary manifestation of “negative genrification,” inviting viewers to adopt alternative reading positions vis-à-vis Korea’s fin-de-siècle film renaissance—an admittedly unusual petition for a film that presumably falls outside the purview of genre studies.

Cinematic Signatures and the Difficulties of Naming

Just as his films frustrate knee-jerk summarizations, so too is Hong Sang-soo a decidedly difficult figure to pin down. Having earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the California College of Arts and a Masters from the Art Institute of Chicago, this self-proclaimed “anti-nationalist” is at once the most cosmopolitan or worldly of filmmakers as well as the “most Korean”—an insular wonder whose ear for the comic inflections, tautological wordplay, and slippages of meaning unique to his native language match his ability to distill parochial mannerisms, city rhythms and quotidian details into a profound meditation on “saenghwal ui balgyon” (“the discovery of everyday life”—a more accurate Anglicization of the original title for *Turning Gate*). One of the many examples of Hong’s unsurpassed command of verbal puns and double meanings occurs during the above-mentioned beach scene in *The Power...* When Chisuk and her friends Mi-son and Un-kyong sing a Korean version of “My Darling Clementine,” a question about the lyrics arises. Singing part of a stanza that in English would read, “You are lost and gone forever,” the girls stumble upon a linguistic discrepancy, and debate whether the Korean lyrics should be “Yongyong odil gatnuya” (“Forever gone where”) or “Nonun odil gatnuya” (“You are gone where”). Because the subject-pronoun is inessential to and variable in Korean sentences—not linguistically pinned to either “he” or “she,” “you” or “I”—their question is rendered moot and sent sliding down the slippery slope of subjectivity. Rather than pursue that question into a signifying pit, the girls

wisely segue to a Korean song—“Arumdaun gusok” (“Beautiful Imprisonment”)—whose lyrics are written in a songbook. This scene emphasizes the sense of forgetfulness, disagreement, and absence that will hereafter permeate the film. Moreover, it gestures toward other linguistic ruptures and moments of communication breakdown, subtly underscoring how a subject can get lost in a thicket of connotative intricacies and identificatory uncertainties. The slipperiness of selfhood and the ontological trickiness of naming—themes pivotal to Hong’s oeuvre—are comically conveyed in an ensuing scene, when the young women meet an awkward policeman from the district who tells a corny joke. Referring to the “musso” (hippopotamus) hood-ornament adorning many Korean RVs, the cop asks, “Do you know why the small figure is there [on the automobile]?” His punchline—“To remind [the vehicle] that it is a hippopotamus in case it forgets its name”—prompts us to consider other markers of identity throughout a film which both frustrates yet demands generic classification.

Eager to slap a name on Hong’s work, Western critics often resort to pulling out analogies from their Crayola boxes of international cinema. While there is an obvious affinity between Hong’s modernist aesthetic and that of his European and American forebears—whether it’s the austerity of Robert Bresson, the catatonic romanticism of Michelangelo Antonioni, or the hangdog longueurs of Jim Jarmusch—over-emphasis on Western precedents and stylistic traditions threatens to undermine the indigenous character and local flavors of his films. Though I myself detect similarities between Hong’s densely-woven narratives and the work of Alan Rudolph at his best (in particular, *Welcome to L.A.*, a bicentennial rondo filled with cheating spouses and self-absorbed artists that conjures *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* in both its spirit of minutia and free-floating, multi-character plot), I will be the first to admit that little of substantive weight can be derived from such a comparison if it is not historically grounded. Cross-cultural comparisons should be done not to validate a filmmaker’s status as a new torchbearer in the high modernist tradition, but rather as an opportunity to expand pre-existing critical paradigms of authorship and genre while moving beyond the rigid strictures of nationalism and ideological hermeticism. If not encyclopedically steeped in the history of international cinema, Hong knows his Bunuel from his Lynch, and can insert a dream sequence into a narrative (as in *The Day...*) that would make either of these two cine-surrealists proud. But how do we make sense of such allusions? If indeed *The Virgin...* is Bressonian in its *mise-en-scène* precision, *Rashomon*ic in its questioning of the camera-eye’s claim to truth, then shouldn’t the politics of transnational appropriation be contextually analyzed? What can be made of the blatant, titular reference to a John Cheever short story in *The Day...*; or of the ironic usage, in *The Power...*, of Lou Reed’s already cynical single “Perfect Day” as diegetic musical commentary? We might question the significance of Scott Nearing, an American pacifist who lived over a hundred years only to commit suicide in the end and whose paperback autobiography Kyong-su, the main character in *Turning Gate*, is immersed in. These are but a handful of instances in which traces of non-Korean culture bob to the surface of intrinsically Korean texts. If indeed Hong’s films invite cross-cultural



Director Hong Sang-soo

Chi-suk and policeman.



comparisons, then we should be prepared to engage their narrative structures, thematic motifs and stylistic patterns on their own generically promiscuous terms.

With the exceptions of Im Kwon-t'aek (a one-man institution in Korea and the first to generate a book-length auteurist study in the West) and Chang Sun-woo (the iconoclastic subject of Tony Rayns' 2001 digital documentary), no other Korean director has earned such international prestige.² Hong Sang-soo is typically portrayed as the posterboy of Korean art cinema whose work, though sometimes disparaged by the general populace at home, is the toast of film festivals throughout Asia, North America and Europe. From Cannes to Montreal, in the pages of *Film Comment* and *Cinéma Scope*, his works are lauded for their nuance and emotional shading as well as their narrative sophistication. Of the director's four films, his second feature, *The Power...*, is the most complex and enigmatic, perhaps the summation of Hong's storytelling art, distilling persistent themes into one supremely crafted work whose mysteries deepen with

each viewing. Indeed, "storytelling" appears to be one of the principal themes of his work. As a filmmaker who once compared the act of making a film to diary-writing, Hong draws liberally from literary traditions and foregrounds the narrative speech-act through chapter-titles and the embedding of stories within stories. Such literary aspirations might seem at odds with the representational modes unique to film, but in fact they allow him to unravel cinema-specific paradigms, such as the medium's chronotopic density, while lending structure to decentred stories perforated by disruption, indeterminacy, and multiplicity.

But for all its narrative sophistication, *The Power...*'s underlying story is deceptively simple: As the Celsius soars and Seoulites leave their sweltering city in droves for more provincial ports of call, three female college students set off for Kangwon-do, a mountainous region stretching along the northeastern coast of South Korea. Of the three young women, Chi-suk takes centre-stage in the narrative. With more than just relaxation on her mind, Chi-suk uses this trip

as an opportunity to banish memories of her previous lover, a married college lecturer named Sang-kwon, from her disconsolate heart. The aftershock of their breakup threatens to derail her happiness, even after she falls into the arms of a policeman from Kangwon-do—another married man who helps the three girls procure a room at a private house. They all get drunk on the eve of their return to Seoul, and later the policeman tries to have sex with Chi-suk. Back in the thriving smog-choked metropolis, an indecisive Chi-suk receives counsel from Un-kyong, who is not able to deter her friend from returning to Kangwon-do for a rendezvous with the policeman. Their second one-night-stand is as alcohol-drenched as their first, and about as fulfilling—culminating with another failed attempt by the cop to have early morning sex with Chi-suk in a hotel room. The hopelessness of the situation sends Chi-suk back once again to Seoul by bus, this time in tears.

Thanks to the vagaries of episodic narrativity, Chi-suk herself is susceptible to erasure and, by the forty-two minute mark, her story gives way to that of her ex-lover, Sang-kwon, who will be the main character throughout the second half of the film. Once the narrative concerning the young woman grinds to a halt, the film recommences abruptly in another bus, where the male protagonist sits. Unlike Chi-suk, Sang-kwon, a man in his late thirties who divides his time between office work and teaching duties at a local university, does not seem to be harboring any resentment. Although he channels his time and energy toward establishing tenure, he seems to lack the drive and initiative necessary to gain permanent footing in academia (though he is not above bribes and unethical tactics in order to land the desired position). He and his friend Chae-wan, a tenured professor a few years his junior, take a weekend trip to Kangwon-do for a momentary break from job and family. A scene from the first half of the film, in which passengers are shown sardine-packed in a train compartment, is repeated from a reverse angle, indicating that Sang-kwon and Chi-suk are on the same train. However, their paths do not cross, as might be expected, but remain parallel. Only at the end of the film, after Sang-kwon has returned home to Seoul and won a position as professor at Ch'ungh' on University, do the two meet again. Their empty and loveless reunion is dampened by her confession that she recently had an abortion—a remark that calls into question her activities in Kangwon-do. Cynically muttering, “Don’t worry...It wasn’t your baby,” Chi-suk hints that she *did* have sex with the policeman. Though she is now unable to have intercourse, she satiates Sang-kwon’s selfish needs through fellatio. The emotional vacuity of this scene, plus the film’s curtain-closing emphasis on abortion, cyclically gestures to Chi-suk’s first act of negation on the beach, where she wiped away a sandy hieroglyph drawn in a dreamily vacant state.

The above description of the narrative does little to indicate its generic affiliations. Nor does it convey the depth of Hong’s “anti-poetics,” in which incidental occurrences play out in extreme long shots and characters appear only to disappear unexpectedly. By not italicizing plot details, Hong places an unusual amount of confidence in the spectator’s imagination. An example of this occurs in Sang-kwon’s narrative, when he and his friend encounter an attractive woman walking alone through the woods. Mistakenly

thinking that she is “available,” Sang-kwon pursues her—an act that ultimately upsets her male traveling companion and likely leads to her murder. The death of the woman, which occurs offscreen, is a genre element (related to the murder mystery) that is treated impartially and indirectly by the filmmaker, who is more concerned with the quiet dementia leading up to such physical acts of violence.

South Korean Film Genres

As in other national contexts, genres function primarily in South Korea as promotional categories, and thus have as much to do with marketing strategies as they do with critical concepts. The heightened recognition of genre as an unspoken contract between audiences and film companies says a lot about the Ch’ungmuro industry’s attempts to forge a reception apparatus through self-definitions. Product differentiation has spawned some unusual neologisms in recent years. Chang Yun-hyon’s *Tell Me Something* (2000), for instance, was marketed by Koo & Cee Film as “hard gore”—a “new” genre that telescoped pornography and the splatter film. *Ardor* (2002), Pyon Yong-ju’s mainstream follow-up to her celebrated “Comfort Woman Trilogy,” was promoted by its producers not simply as a melodrama, but as a “passionate melodrama” (“kyokjong melo”), a nomenclature that seemed to implicate the filmmaker’s gender and sensitivity to the spectatorial desires of the film’s largely female audience. And in one of the most politically (in)correct, ideologically suspect maneuvers, Kim Tae-sung’s *Bungee Jumping on their Own* (2001) was labeled as both a “soulmate film” and a “fusion love story” so as to counter accusations that the narrative’s same-sex love story was more homoerotic than universal (the filmmakers, in tempering the film’s queer sensibilities, were obviously trying to eke out a wider audience for this marketing nightmare).

The last three years have seen the emergence of new generic dominants in the industry, from the ubiquitous “Chop’ok” or gangster drama (*Die Bad* [2000], *Failan* [2001], *Friend*) to a post-World Cup batch of sports films (*Champion*, *YMCA Baseball Team*). While they reverberate with the current cultural zeitgeist of renewed masculinity, these internationally distributed films suggest that the South Korean film industry has grown from a burgeoning contender to a heavyweight champion in the East Asian market. Film parody is only the most recent manifestation of genre diversification, and has proven to be fertile ground for up-and-coming directors, based on the box-office success of Kim Sang-jin’s *Kick the Moon* (2001) and Chang Kyu-song’s *Funny Movie* (2002)—the latter a virtual compendium of intertextual references and in-jokes that waggishly rewards the audience’s familiarity with genre conventions. Though, on the surface, the two are as similar as rubber chickens and real elephants, *The Power of Kangwon Province* shares with *Funny Movie* a deconstructive impulse—a critical engagement with genrification as process. While Chang’s parodic text accomplishes this by making overt comic allusions to *Sopyonje* (1993), *Contact* (1997), *Whispering Corridors* (1998), *No. 3* (1999), *Shiri*, *Attack the Gas Station* (1999), *Lies* (1999), *Nowhere to Hide* (1999), *Joint Security Area* (2000), and numerous other films in staccato fashion, Hong’s satirizes the industrial standards of contemporary cinematic praxis in a more languorous, deceptive, and ambiguous way. If *Funny Movie*

operates according to the positive logic of accretion, then *The Power...* operates according to the negative logic of depletion.

In *The Power...*, genre depletion is linked to textual negation. As critical concepts relevant to everything from social theory and literary studies to macroeconomics, *negation* and *negativity* have filtered into western academia over the past four decades through the writings of such far-flung theorists as Theodor Adorno, Stephen Heath, and Slavoj Zizek. For Heath, negativity is a potentially transgressive force at the heart of Hollywood's classically constructed "narrative space," one that enables and contains yet emerges from a "realist" text's illusionism; whereas in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* it has come to both represent and contest the post-Cold War gravitation toward multinational capitalism. Giving the term a slightly different shading, Zizek's *Tarrying with the Negative* posits it as a form of radical post-Marxist social antagonism. But for all of its sundry uses and miscellaneous meanings, the negative has become one of the guiding principles for disarticulating the hegemonic "order of things" in the post-'68 era of shattered ideals—an era in which most possibilities of radical change (social, political, ideological) have been exhausted. Hong Sang-soo, an ostensibly "apolitical" filmmaker, ironically engages history by turning away from it, by pushing it to the margins of the frame and dealing with its psychological fallout head-on. Hong is interested in the concreteness of life, the material things that congeal around a person and delimit his or her intellectual, emotional and interpersonal maturation. The dueling desires to *leach away* and to *leave intact* the residual effects of this fallout is allegorically alluded to in one of the many curious passages of dialogue in *The Power...*: Taking a break from hiking, Sang-kwon informs Chae-wan how to wash his body. Going against hygienic reason, he tells his friend that he need only take a bath twice a month. It is good for the body to *build up dead skin*, which can then be *scraped away* (as a snake might slither out of its skin). This "ttae," or epidermal residue, which connotes the middle-class male protagonist's susceptibility to corruption and cowardliness, rests on negation and is similar to the mantra-like expression spoken throughout Hong's *Turning Gate*: "It's difficult being human, but let's not become monsters." This phrase signifies both the liberatory and imprisoning facets of the negative ("let's *not*") even as its arbitrary and meaningless repetition turns speech into an empty gesture.

The art-house desire to do away with traditional categories and liberate narrative from the straightjacket of convention is destined to fail, for, as Rick Altman has remarked, even "anti-genre romantics could not escape the tyranny of genre history as they sought to destroy generic specificity and with it the weight of the past."³ This builds on Jacques Derrida's argument that, "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre...yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself."⁴ We find in Derrida's words the very crux of Hong's cinema: *participation*, a decidedly positive and playful upshot of the negative. Despite its dinosaur status, genre has survived into the postmodern era—a period when canonical genres are thought to be anachronistic, out-

moded, because they cannot fully contain the textual indeterminacies of contemporary film praxis.

According to Fredric Jameson, "high art" has been historically characterized as the repository of all that is unsaid or repressed by society. Though much the same could be said about "low" or trash art, high modernist cultural productions—of which *The Power...* is an example—recuperate the signifying impulses which fall outside the domain of genre codification. In his essay, "The Existence of Italy," Jameson argues that a single text can, under fortuitous circumstances, provide a multi-genre microcosm of the ideological tensions at play during a particular historical moment, even as it masks codes of realism through distraction tactics. To illustrate his point, Jameson briefly discusses the MGM Depression-era film *After the Thin Man*, a 1936 sequel to the popular screen adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's detective novel *The Thin Man*. Though *After the Thin Man* is explicitly affiliated with the already-hybrid form of screwball mystery, a number of other generic traces can be teased from the text, from *noir* elements to musical motifs, from "white telephone" iconography to Wild West symbology. But despite its omnibus-like ability to oscillate between distinct generic thresholds, this classical studio-era film "which parades the various genres before us as in a variety show or music hall...has nothing to do in its structure with that transcendence of genre we will observe in nascent sound-film modernism; rather, it remains a specifically generic text, which in the process reinforces the genre system as a whole, as though the formal commitment to any specific genre finally obligated the filmic text to touch bases with all of them, in something like an inversion of what will later be called the auteur theory."⁵

Conversely, *The Power of Kangwon Province* is a film whose "author" (unlike the director of *After the Thin Man*, W. S. Van Dyke II) has not slipped into anonymity but rather signifies and constitutes in his own right a cinematic shorthand for recurrent stylistic and thematic motifs. By trotting out various semantic elements only to capsize the ontological basis upon which they are built, Hong's film works as a deconstruction rather than outright repudiation or celebration of the genre system, stripping away the categorical imperatives of genrification while highlighting the spectator's own allegiance to and pleasure in a pre-inscribed system of codes through diegetic acts of authorial erasure and re-inscription. The difficulty in ascribing categorical links to Hong's films derives, ironically, from their already encoded status as "art films," a label which presupposes liberation from a factory-line mode of production yet unimpeachable connection to the name "Hong Sang-soo," a signifier in its own right. With *The Power...*, authorial expressiveness transforms a simple story about ex-lovers into a rumination on repetition and change, two mutually entangled aspects of genre formation.

The film, rather than being handcuffed to any one genre, instead mobilizes and consolidates several generic impulses. In the following paragraphs, I summon some of those impulses, and explain how *The Power...* both visualizes and erases the foundations of genre in a way that can be likened to "anti-poetics." Just as critic Douglas Winter has argued that the so-called "anti-horror film" is horror in its "purest state," so too does *The Power...* use genre conventions subversively, playing against them and going beyond them in

Sang-kwon and prostitute.



search of new epistemological paths. It does this by incorporating anomalous elements that are the generic province of the family melodrama, the buddy film, the murder mystery, the police procedural, the youthpic, and the travelogue.

THE MASTERY OF GENERIC FAILURE: THE POWER OF KANGWON PROVINCE AS...

...Anti-Family Melodrama

According to the Korean Film Archive Internet database (www.koreafilm.or.kr), *The Power...* falls squarely under the "melodrama" umbrella. However, the film's meager domestic box-office numbers in the spring of 1998 attest to the fact that the film might be labeled a "failed melodrama"—financially unsuccessful heir apparent to the many classics of the genre, such as *Madame Freedom* (1956), *The Houseguest and My Mother* (1961), *Bitter Once Again* (1968), and

Hometown of Stars (1974).⁶ Though we might be tempted to brush off its lack of commercial viability as a sign of the film-going public's appetite for big-budget spectacles, I argue that its "failure" in faithfully adhering to the time-honored tropes of melodrama marks a success on the part of Hong Sang-soo in upending the semantic base of Korea's film genre *par excellence*.

While Hollywood's Eisenhower-era soap-operas typically revolve around upper-middle-class wives and widows trapped in dysfunctional homes, a number of the family melodramas of the Korean Golden Age—such as Shin Sang-ok's *Romance Papa* (1960) and Kang Dae-jin's *Mr. Pak* (1960) and *The Coachman* (1961)—centre on a benevolent patriarch (usually played by Kim Sung-ho) who experiences intense generational and class conflict in the face of modernization. Running parallel to this trend is a strong tradition of maternal melodrama, from Han Hyong-mo's *Madame Freedom* and Shin Sang-ok's *The Houseguest and My Mother* to sleeker and more sophisticated updatings such as E J-yong's *An Affair*

(1998) and Chong Chi-u's *Happy End* (1999). Regardless of their gendered focalizations, practically all Korean melodramas thematize the friction between familial duties and individual desires, usually ending with reconciliation and reaffirmation of the family, a self-sustaining unit whose strength is derived from the members' resistance to outside threats.

Many feminist critics cite Chong So-yong's *Bitter Once Again* as a prototypical melodrama, a film distantly reminiscent of *The Power...* insofar as the former similarly fluctuates between male and female subjectivities, between a middle-class married man and his ex-lover who, like Chi-suk, had fallen for a "sonsaengnim" ("teacher"—a term that denotes male intellectual superiority and class status). This woman from the past re-enters his life with an eight-year old illegitimate son in tow. Shame and embarrassments ensue, as the guilt-wracked husband breaks the news to his wife, who years ago had discovered his infidelity through an accidental encounter with the mistress. During their second face-to-face confrontation, the two women negotiate custody of the son. Competition or rivalry between the wife and the mistress is a fundamental component of numerous Korean melodramas, from Shin Sang-ok's *Romance Gray* (1963) to Kim Ki-yong's "Housemaid" trilogy (1960/1971/1982). This component is omitted from *The Power...*. At no point in the film do the two women presumably vying for Sang-kwon's love ever meet. Nor is Sang-kwon's son a locus around which men and women gather and shed tears. Although Sang-kwon expresses casual affection for his son when he fleetingly appears, the child fails to function as an emotional focus. The missing confrontation between Chi-suk and Sang-kwon's wife, the non-presence of Chi-suk's family, and the absence of a child-centric discourse collectively renovate the family melodrama genre through acts of erasure and negation.

...Anti-Buddy Film

If male-female relations are shown to be in a state of paralysis, then what does the film say of same-sex companionship? Such a rhetorical inquiry forms the thematic core of the genre known as the buddy film, a type of narrative in which private prerogative and individual autonomy give way to usually unselfish, mutually-fulfilling allegiances. The buddy film genre is certainly no stranger to Korean cinema, which has been characterized by feminist critics as virulently misogynous, a boys' club whose control over modes of production and discrimination against women reflects the gender hegemony of a patriarchal society. A short list of films exploring male camaraderie—often to the exclusion or subjugation of women—includes *Mandala* (1981), *Declaration of Fools* (1983), *Gagman* (1988), *Chilsu and Mansu* (1988), *Two Cops* (1993), *Wild Animals* (1997), and *Joint Security Area*. The everyday world of marriage, income, and familial ties is pushed to the periphery of the buddy universe, which accommodates only those congenialities that strengthen the fraternal bonds between men. In *The Power of Kangwon Province*, the relationship between Sang-kwon and Chae-wan initially mimics the buddy formula, depicting a world in which wives and children mean less to men than their loyal business partners and associates. Indeed, if Sang-kwon is attached to anyone besides Chi-suk, then Chae-wan would indeed appear to be that person. Yet the emotional bond

between the two is weakened over time, and lack of solidarity exacerbates the sense of personal isolation and egocentric behavior. More than anything, they share a joint narcissism, which underscores the hypocrisy and pettiness of male relationships. Even acts of generosity betray a latent stinginess, as when Chae-wan buys eyedrops for Sang-kwon—not the expensive brand from Japan but the cheap variety from Korea. Later, Sang-kwon, as if to display his seniority and save face, "generously" pays for both a round of drinks and two prostitutes for the evening, but does so in an insulting and condescending way that exposes his inferiority complex. In the end, the two men go their separate ways; Chae-wan takes the last remaining airplane seat and returns to Seoul while Sang-kwon stays behind in Kangwon-do an extra day.

The Western literary, cinematic and televisual imagination spills over with male duos whose affection for one another endures all challenges and misfortunes, whether in the furnace of war-time battle (as in such classic WWI novels and films as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *What Price Glory?*) or in the interstellar playground of outer space. A list of famous "buddies" would include the Lone Ranger and Tonto; Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday; Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson; Poirot and Hastings; Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock; and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. The latter duo—nineteenth-century Wyoming outlaws popularized by the eponymous 1969 film directed by George Roy Hill—became permanently ingrained in the spectatorial consciousness as devoted buddies jumping together from a mountain cliff. This stock image of the two friends falling to their possible demise cemented the theme of undying loyalty. When men plummet from great heights in Korean films (for example, a filmmaker's suicidal leap from a highrise at the beginning of *Declaration of Fools*; or a graphic artist's free-fall from a billboard at the end of *Chilsu and Mansu*), such moments of peril tend to occur not in tandem but as solo acts of self-destruction, as doomed rituals reflecting the psychological toil that arises in a politically and/or socially repressive climate.

In *The Power...*, the two so-called buddies are not only afraid of falling (near the craggy summit of Sorak-san, Sang-kwon and Chae-wan sit at a safe distance from the mountain ledge and watch foolhardy tourists testing their mettle near the precipice) but are also mortified by a social phenomenon prevalent among the intellectual and junior-managerial classes—one in which a slide down the promotional ladder is equivalent to losing one's fiscal as well as physical footing in the world. Read outside the generic framework of the buddy film, a brief scene in which Chae-wan boasts about the "anti-slip soles" on his new pair of Nikes would seem extraneous; but when understood as a sign of regressively figured masculinity (implicitly linked to the West), his curious comment gains relevance and unleashes the thematic undertow of a film constantly hovering over images and non-images of falling. Before their ascent up the mountain, Sang-kwon and Chae-wan discuss the cable car's safety, noting an information plaque near the entrance that details the maximum tonnage of the vehicle and the strength of the cable. Their fear of falling from the mountain echoes an earlier scene: After dropping off his application documents at Ch'unch'on University, Sang-kwon encounters a stray dog

and is frozen in fear. His timidity stands in marked contrast to the drunken caprices of the fearless cop who hangs precariously from a hotel balcony in an attempt to sober up and have sex with Chi-suk. The “failure” of the film to make good on its promises of generic satisfaction is thus linked to a deficiency in male agency, an impotence on the part of self-centred men who would rather risk losing friendship and romance than face the domestic repercussions and societal backlash of infidelity. Sang-kwon’s inability to act upon the world is thus a source rather than a byproduct of the film’s abortive claim to genericity. This is perhaps most tellingly evoked in the film’s reference to and displacement of tropes central to the “murder mystery” and “police procedural” genres.

...Anti-Murder Mystery and Anti-Police Procedural

Though Hong’s detractors sometimes assert that “nothing happens” in his films, even hastily written synopses reveal quite the opposite. Besides the obvious dollops of sex, violence, and alcohol, in both *The Day...* and *The Power...* there is a murder, a key ingredient within the mystery and the police procedural genres. However, in *The Power...*, the question which haunts the narrative—How did the mysterious woman whom Sang-kwon met in Kangwon-do die?—is resolved non-dramatically and ambiguously, thus short-circuiting the audience’s expectations. By relegating details about this potentially intriguing and hermeneutically rich source of generic material to the periphery, Hong confounds preconceptions of what constitutes a “strong” narrative (i.e. one organized around a compelling premise and carried through in logical order to its inevitable, yet satisfying dénouement).

The murder mystery, one of the perennial genres in American cinema, has become a fixture in recent Korean cinema. Such films as Pak Chol-su’s *301/302* (1995), Yu Sang-uk’s *Mystery of the Cube* (1999), Chang Yu-hyon’s *Tell Me Something*, Yi Myong-hyon’s *Truth Game* (2000), Kim Sung-hong’s *Say Yes* (2001), Pae Ch’ang-ho’s *The Last Witness* (2001), and Kang U-sok’s *Public Enemy* (2002) revolve around enigmas—the How, Why and (most importantly) Who behind a murder case. In these and similar whodunits, detectives mobilize an investigative gaze so as to piece together clues that lead to the unmasking of a killer who is revealed at the end. This, the hermeneutic crux of the genre, is notably absent in Hong’s film. In an early scene, we hear that there has been an “accident” on the mountain. Someone has fallen off a cliff. A scream was heard, but no witnesses have thus far been found. In Sang-kwon’s section of the film, attentive viewers learn that the victim was the same woman he briefly met in Kangwon-do. She was likely murdered by a male companion named Myong-hun, whom Sang-kwon sees in the airport alone. Whether a lover or a husband, Myong-hun is certainly no villainous mastermind but instead another, more troubling archetype: a jealous man pushed too far. Had the Kangwon-do cop not been engaged in a drunken soirée with the girls, he might have participated in the criminal investigation and given the narrative a shot of iconography unique to the murder mystery (in response to the girls’ question, “How come you didn’t go?” the cop evasively claims that his beat is confined to the village and does not extend to the mountains).

Additionally, had Sang-kwon taken an initiative and reported the crime in person at a local police department, rather than from the comfortable anonymity and distance afforded by the telephone, images associated with the police procedural genre might have entered more fully into the picture. In such films as *Two Cops* and *Nowhere to Hide*, male toughness and gut instinct are only partially kept in check by guidelines, procedures, and the need for empirical evidence. The goal of the law enforcement officer in the typical police procedural is to anticipate the motives of criminals and apprehend them before carrying out their nefarious plans. In *The Power...*, the cop who claims he is not cut out for the job is considering quitting the force (though he does not yet have any plans for the future). This video-game-addicted man does not even carry a gun, saying to Chi-suk and her friends (who question whether he really is a policeman) that he absent-mindedly left it behind. These examples show that men, not women, are the source of a cinematic lack in Hong’s universe, and their apprehension in the face of natural and human obstacles provides a basis for generic critique.

...Anti-Teenpic

The “teenpic,” historically cross-pollinated with other genres (such as science fiction and the social-problem film of the 1950s), would seem to have little in common with *The Power of Kangwon Province*, an adult-oriented “art film” whose thematic concerns are deeply rooted in Korean soil. However, in much the same way Hong’s work mobilizes archetypal buddy film motifs only to capsize the very modes of production upon which they are buttressed, semantic details affiliated with the youthpic genre sift into the diegesis and provide yet another opportunity for both textual erasure and generic negation. Though many Hollywood teenpics produced throughout the last five decades revolve around juvenile delinquency and generational angst, they more often than not devolve into frivolous flings on the beach where handsome hunks and Barbie Doll blondes spend their “Endless Summers” and bacchanalian spring breaks. Populating the seashores and shopping malls of these films are Coppertoned teenyboppers, many of whom are played by ensemble casts of twentysomethings—actors and actresses whose facial stubble or chest size belie their pubescence. While the iconographic beach setting in *The Power of Kangwon Province* initially suggests a carefree place for the three young women to frolic about and gaze flirtatiously at the opposite sex, the film departs from the generic coordinates of the youth picture in numerous ways. Not only does it foreground an image of femininity that does not correspond to traditional notions of Korean beauty, but it also robs the potentially liberating seaside backdrop of its erotic intensity. The sparsely populated beach is little more than a lonely vista, a melancholy landscape where one might momentarily reflect on the messiness, not sexiness, of life.

Chi-suk, Mi-son and Un-kyong are far from being the fresh-faced, perpetually convivial schoolmates we have come to expect in the youth picture (which, in South Korean, dates back to the “Yalgae cycle” of films from the late-1960s to the 1980s—a comic series focusing on mischievous yet wholesome youth). To begin with, these child-like, somewhat homely women are college students and,

though they are not immune to adolescent fantasies, have much weightier issues on their minds than their American equivalents. Chi-suk, for instance, will have an abortion by the end of the film, and her failure to enter into motherhood not only brings to mind her own absent mother (a staple of the teenpic) but also underscores the moral ambivalence at the heart of a genre that sees its protagonists in a liminal stage of life—as children preparing to have children. Chi-suk is literally caught between teenage dreams and adult responsibilities. When she alludes to her high school years in the scene immediately following their trip to the beach, she recounts an anecdote about a lovelorn boy who fell from a terrace and was rushed to the hospital. Though it represents the most memorable event in her life, the anecdote will soon be overwritten by the traumatic termination of her pregnancy, an event that Chi-suk hides from her friends. Unlike the gynocentric coming-of-age films produced in Hollywood, *The Power...* does not paint a rosy image of female bonding and solidarity, but shows interpersonal relations among young women to be lacerated by jealousy and apathy, with occasional flashes of forgiveness to alleviate the bleakness (after a drunken night of bitter tears and brutal honesty, Chi-suk and Mi-son apologize to one another the next morning). The film's honest, underplayed presentation of same-sex companionship paved the way for subsequent Korean anti-teenpics, such as Im Sun-rye's *Three Friends* (1996) and Chong Chae-un's *Take Care of My Cat* (2001), the latter a film which similarly charts the interpersonal dynamic between five Inchonites—high school graduates whose friendship weathers physical, economic and emotional strains against a bleak industrial backdrop.

...Anti-Travel Film

The “travelogue” or “exploration” genre dates back to turn-of-the-century “scenics,” early American, French and British non-fiction *actualités* offering panoramic, sometimes stereoscopic, visions of exotic tourist sites, from Cairo to Shanghai and all points between. From these filmed scenics emerged the lyrical city-symphony film of the 1920s as well as the “mountain film” genre that gained popularity in Scandinavia, Italy, France and Germany throughout the ensuing decades. In this latter manifestation, the outdoors provided a pristine if inhospitable landscape to be conquered by daredevil mountaineers. Man's ability to reach the proverbial peak in such films as *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929) and *The Ski Chase* (1931) denotes a transcendence over awesome elemental forces—one notably absent in *The Power of Kangwon Province*, which features timid men pitted against a more formidable foe of their own making. Given Hong's penchant for extreme long shots, the settings of his films threaten to dwarf the already small characters at every turn. Though the same could be said of other picaresque tales, such as Yi Man-hi's *Road to Sampo* (1975), Pae Ch'ang-ho's *Whale Hunting* (1984), Yo Kyun-dong's *Out of the World* (1994), or any number of films made by elder statesman Im Kwon-t'aek which similarly revolve around men and women searching for personal and artistic meaning in natural environments, the erasure of tourist attractions in Hong's films marks a significant break from the past and stymies the spectatorial drive toward all things exotic.

As denoted by the title, at least half of Hong's film is set in

Kangwon-do. With its combination of craggy highlands, radiant beaches and spiritual sanctuaries, Kangwon-do provides a bucolic alternative to the smog-choked capital city—one which we naturally expect to see depicted as a series of sweeping vistas and lovingly-photographed postcard images. Had another filmmaker been behind the lens, this vacation getaway might indeed have been rendered more resplendently, less interior-bound. In lieu of capturing Kangwon-do's natural beauty, magnificent monuments, and local celebrations, *The Power...* feeds us a small diet of bird's-eye views (such as the girls splashing in riverbeds) or, more often, tiny swatches of a much larger landscape which intensify feelings of spectatorial estrangement and the characters' mounting ennui. When Chi-suk visits Naksan temple, for example, the towering white statue known to Koreans as the “Ocean Bodhisattva” remains offscreen for the duration of the shot. The camera, which simply fixates on Chi-suk kneeling but does not show the object of her prayer, visually conveys the young woman's isolation as well as the simultaneous presence and absence of an obliquely-situated genre element.

Though all of his films deal with indigenous travel, Hong has exhibited remarkable restraint in his depictions of tourist destinations, opting several times to conceal or deflect anticipated “money shots” of shrines, pagodas, folkcraft villages, theme parks and museums. For example, the promised trip to Cheju Island in *The Virgin...* never arrives. Instead, Chae-hun, who had originally promised Su-jong a lover's excursion to the isle, convinces her that a cheaper and nearer hotel in Uidong (a district of Seoul) will sufficiently serve their needs and bring to fruition their long-delayed sex-act. A comparable excursion-exclusion occurs in *Turning Gate*: After Kyong-su's friend recounts in detail the folkloric legend of the Ch'ongp'yong-sa revolving gate near Ch'ungh'on (a fable involving a snake-coiled Chinese princess and the titular entrance that together suggest a metaphor for lovemaking), the two men opt not to see it at the last minute, and instead return to the ferryboat on which they arrived. Later, when Kyong-su searches for the woman he met briefly on a train in Kyongju, he departs from his sightseeing itinerary, climbs a residential hill and peers out over the dingy rooftops of the former Shilla Dynasty capital—its famous tourist sites conspicuous in their absence. In each of these cases, sights are intentionally left unseen, and the whimsical actions (or non-actions) of men derail the film's potential for generic fulfillment.

The Power... is filled with similar moments of emptiness, and its emphatic aversion of the touristic gaze is even ironically commented on in a self-reflexive scene set in the woods. Hiking through the mountain forest, Chi-suk and her friends momentarily stop at a “picture spot.” As Chi-suk and Mi-son pose for their photo by a stream, the light-dappled forest provides a “beautiful” backdrop for a snapshot that Un-kyong, the photographer who adduces the scene from the audience's point of view, calls “mystical.” This is the only moment in the film when an aestheticized transposition of the characters' (and audiences') desires bubbles to the surface. But like so many other instances of erasure throughout the film, the shot's “beauty” is undermined by its status as constructed or mediated illusion. This point is strengthened by the many scenes set inside photo-shops throughout Hong's oeuvre (spaces that serve as metaphors of a fabricated reality—one of mummified poses and empty gestures keeping intact the

threadbare sanctity of family) as well as by the fact that Un-kyong, before departing Kangwon-do, loses her cherished Nikon. The absence of the camera, a gift from Un-kyong's own vacationing uncle in Japan, prevents the spectator from witnessing the "beautiful" photo of Chi-suk and Mi-son as it was designed to be seen—as a fetish object linked nostalgically to an inauthentic past.

In the Absence of Writing: Erasure as Textual Inscription

Just as Hong performs a *tabula rasa* of the touristic gaze, withholding shots of breathtaking vistas that are part and parcel of the vacation-travel film genre, so too does he limit the epistemological gaze. When Sang-kwon receives an official letter from Ch'ungh'on University reporting the good news that he had been waiting for, this pivotal moment in his career is presented anti-climactically. We do not see the contents of the correspondence, though the next scene, showing an after-dinner drink among professorial colleagues, attests to his new position. But perhaps the most significant moment of textual erasure occurs when Chi-suk returns to her apartment after washing herself at a public bath. Just as she enters, she spots pencil-scribbles on the wall next to the door, spelling out the message: "Breathing deeply, let's wait a little longer." There is no indication at this point who the author of the message is, or why it was written. As an extension of her own cleaning impulse, she rubs out the graffiti. Later, in Sang-kwon's narrative, we see him writing the words that she had earlier erased. Because of the repetitive and recursive nature of the narrative, erasure actually *precedes* writing. Thus, erasure is a primal scene whose own undoing or effacement is an act of textual inscription. Though Chi-suk's narrative has effectively been "written-over" by Sang-kwon's, she has the power to erase, just as she has chosen to abort her baby (whose earlier presence as life inside her belly only spawned another absence).

Hong is not a filmmaker given to extravagance, and his (and cinematographer Kim Yong-chol's) judicious deployment of deep focus, suppression of close-ups, and static camera placements effectively render quotidian details in slice-of-life tableaux. Less forgiving audience members might be lulled to sleep by the tortoise-paced progression of his narratives—as if conscious of such feelings, there is a point-of-view shot from Chi-suk's position outside a temple showing two turtles floating languorously in a pond. But this is precisely what Hong's style is about: Leaching away excess so as to make way for *anomalies*—the "turtles" that have no overt function in the text. If, according to the old adage, "less is more," then *nothing is the most*. Out of nothing comes a bounty. This is the negative flipside of the generic coin. On the surface, Hong's minimalism runs counter to the superfluity of detail in 1990s genre films, which, as Wheeler Winston Dixon argues, are "everywhere a creature of excess—excess running time, excess budgeting, excess spectacle."⁷ Made during the era of the Korean blockbuster (when the incorporation of digital special effects and the convenience of post-production doctoring contribute to the proliferation of picture-perfect extravaganzas), *The Power of Kangwon Province* zeroes in on the emptiness at the heart of cinematic spectacle. But just as explosive genre films such as *Shiri* beguile audiences by diverting attention away from

that void, so too does Hong's unfussy and introverted style distract us from the film's generic elements, which sometimes appear like "matter out of place."

Matter out of Place and the Metaphysics of Modernity

Toward the end of his life, a bitter Mark Twain wrote the posthumously-published novelette *The Mysterious Stranger*, in which the following words drip from the mouth of Satan's nephew: "Man is made of dirt...Man is a museum of diseases, a home of impurities; he comes to-day and is gone to-morrow." Though the young narrator, a church organist's son who meets the evil apparition, believes that "one cannot compare things by which their nature and by the interval between them are not comparable," he begins to grasp in those infernal words a fundamental truth about the human condition, one that had heretofore escaped his consciousness. This truth has not been lost on Hong Sang-soo. Not only do his multi-character episode films force us to compare people and situations that, on the surface, have little in common; but he also draws our attention to the "dirtiness" of men and women who are like mere specks of dust in a hostile universe. Hence the thematic obsession with cleanliness, which can be read as a futile attempt to bide one's time before earthly departure. One of the four main characters in *The Day...*, a film filled with literal and figurative "stains," is a cheating husband whose handwashing compulsion grows not only from his fear that he has contracted a sexually transmitted disease but also from his desire to "wash away everything tainted in our hearts." The husband's neurosis reemerges in *Turning Gate*, when Kyong-su unexpectedly says to a woman he has been hotly pursuing, "Let's not have sex...Let's stay clean and die."

But what is dirt if not "matter out of place"? The title of *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* highlights the sense of displacement and incongruity that accompanies this well-known definition of dirt. With the exception of "Babe," the titular pig in George Miller's 1998 film who travels to the city, farm animals are not usually found in wells. In Hong's films, however, there are numerous examples of matter out of place, foreign elements whose "unbelonging" ruptures the visual coherence and verisimilitude of otherwise realistically depicted scenes. *The Power of Kangwon Province* brims with such instances. Before he and Chae-wan depart for Kangwon-do, Sang-kwon gets a speck of dirt in his eye. Though a minor incident, five minutes are devoted to this minutia, suggesting that other similar "irritants" will test our own patience before the end of the film. In a later scene, Sang-kwon goes to Professor Kim's apartment and drinks a glass of Coke with a bug floating in it (though certainly out of its natural element, the bug could be said to represent the corruptibility of Western culture—a latent theme in this and other Hong Sang-soo films). After leaving his former professor, Sang-kwon realizes that he has left his umbrella inside and—although only a few paces outside the building—opts not to retrieve it, perhaps because his already-wounded pride could not tolerate such embarrassment.

Just as a speck of dirt in Sang-kwon's eye is an example of matter out of place, so too are there more "metaphysical" displacements throughout the film. In one scene, Sang-kwon enters his office carrying a Tupperware bowl filled with water and two fish left behind by neighbors. The pres-

ence of the fish recalls an early scene in Chi-suk's narrative, when the three girls happen upon a fish floundering about on a dirt path. "How did that get here?" they ask before Chi-suk buries the still-living fish under a rock. Even earlier in the film, when the three girls are at the beach, another visual anachronism pricks our senses. On the beach is a pony, which seems as grossly out of place as a pig in a well. Informed that the horse's name is Zuppie, they ask the animal, "What are you doing here?" Reminiscent of the severed ear in the grass during the opening scene of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986)—an appendage that, like Hong's fish, mysteriously figures in the last half of the film—the bizarre and unaccountable images in *The Power...* suggest that, for all of its ethnographic authenticity as a social document, the film refuses to be categorized as simply a realist text. Like the invisible tennis ball that rolls to a rest on its grassy cushion at the end of Antonioni's metaphysical mystery *Blow Up* (1966), inexplicable elements such as the fish and the pony contribute to the film's "irreal realism," imparting an air of strangeness and irregularity to a straightforward story. Ever since his first film, based on Ku Hyo-so's novel *Natson yorum* (*Strange Summer*), strangeness has been a salient aspect of Hong's universe. This may emerge as simply a slight deviation from the norm, as when the Kangwon-do policeman muses to Chi-suk, "Isn't this strange? I never thought we'd be meeting and drinking like this." More often, the film's strangeness springs from the paradox of absence, which is necessarily predicated on a presence that continues to exert psychic and emotional sway. The argument that because one is not in a given place he or she must be somewhere else—a vector of situated identity that is by definition not "here"—suggests that the film's emphasis on place and *province* underscores the *inability to forget* someone in his or her absence. The puzzling ambiguity of the final scene, which shows Sang-kwon returning to his old office and staring into the void of the makeshift fish bowl (which now contains only one fish) suggests that we too are bound to an ineffable yet palpable absence.

Beginning this essay with a passage from Foucault's magisterial if fiercely debated *Les Mots et les choses* might seem to be a capricious way of staging Hong's unique and overlooked connection to film genre. After all, Foucault, in arguing against the transcendental consciousness of the phenomenological subject for a theory of discursive practices unique to Western teleology, is not concerned with concrete individuals but in epistemes—movements of knowledge-flow with no apparent connection to Korean consciousness or history. But in introducing the latent characteristics of *The Power of Kangwon Province* by way of a text which locates the experience of order in the gap between logic and perception (or, in other words, "the non-place of language"),⁸ I have attempted to construct countervailing alternatives to the binaristic logic subtending film studies. Though critics are apt to separate art-house films from the mainstream chaff, we can begin reconciling pop cinema and its brainier cousin once the horizons of genre studies are expanded. Skeptical readers may chafe at the notion that something positive can be derived from a film full of negations, but *The Power...* can not only be fruitfully linked to historical trends within the South Korean film industry but also extended well beyond its indigenous cultural context. Before the incoming tide of Foucault's epistemic eraser enacts a "natur-

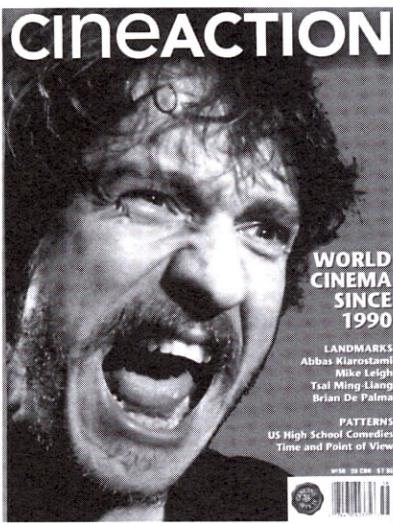
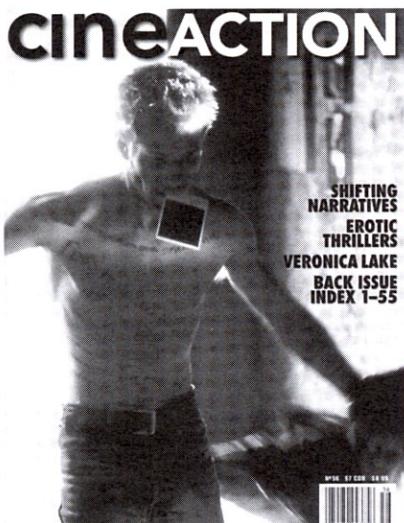
al" dissolution of time, before the waves come lapping at the haptic shore, let us recall the image of Chi-suk on the beach: Just as she obliterates her own authorial signature—the "stamp" of identity that would bind her to the past—so too does Hong attempt to return things to a natural and unadorned state from which new and less restrictive categories can be constructed.

In returning to these images of erasure in Foucault's and Hong's texts, when the metaphorical breakers threaten to wash over beaches Past and Present, it should now be apparent that *The Power...* had much the same effect of those waves, and indeed rode the crest of a new wave of Korean cinema that cleared the stage for subsequent generic deconstructions from the likes of directors Yi Ch'ang-dong, Yun Chong-ch'an, and Pak Ch'an-uk. With the benefit of historical hindsight, it is possible to situate Hong's 1998 film at that pivotal point in Korean history when increased artistic freedom and reduced censorship paved the way for a revitalization, if not complete erasure, of pre-existing film praxis. Released the same spectacular year, Yi Kwang-mo's anti-war film *Spring in My Hometown* (1998) and Ho Chin-ho's muted melodrama *Christmas in August* further contributed to this new artistic movement. That three films of such profundity and magnitude arrived within six months of each other attests to the dynamism of South Korea's *fin-de-siècle* film renaissance. *The Power of Kangwon Province* is more than a refreshing, palette-cleansing break from the earlier spate of straight-faced melodramas; more than an oasis of contemplation amid the hyperbolic bombast of contemporary blockbusters. It is an exemplary manifestation of both the positive and negative aspects of genrification, made at a time when genre-based filmmaking has become an industrial imperative for a national cinema whose current reputation for excellence remains unexcelled.

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I would like to thank Hye Seung Chung for her invaluable assistance in translating and conceptualizing key texts and films. Her support—both intellectual and emotional—was crucial to the writing of this paper.

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2002, p. 422.
- 2 The first book-length study of a Korean filmmaker published in the United States is *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim, eds. Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2002.
- 3 Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," *Reliquifying American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998, p. 1.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, "The Laws of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 7, no. 1 Autumn 1980, p. 65.
- 5 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 176.
- 6 According to the Korean Film Archive database, the box-office receipts for *The Power of Kangwon Province* upon its original theatrical release indicate a movie attendance of just 15,967. This figure is less than 1% of the attendance for such recent blockbusters as *Shiri*, *Joint Security Area*, and *Friend*.
- 7 Wheeler Winston Dixon, from the Introduction to *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000, pp.4-5.
- 8 Foucault, xxv.



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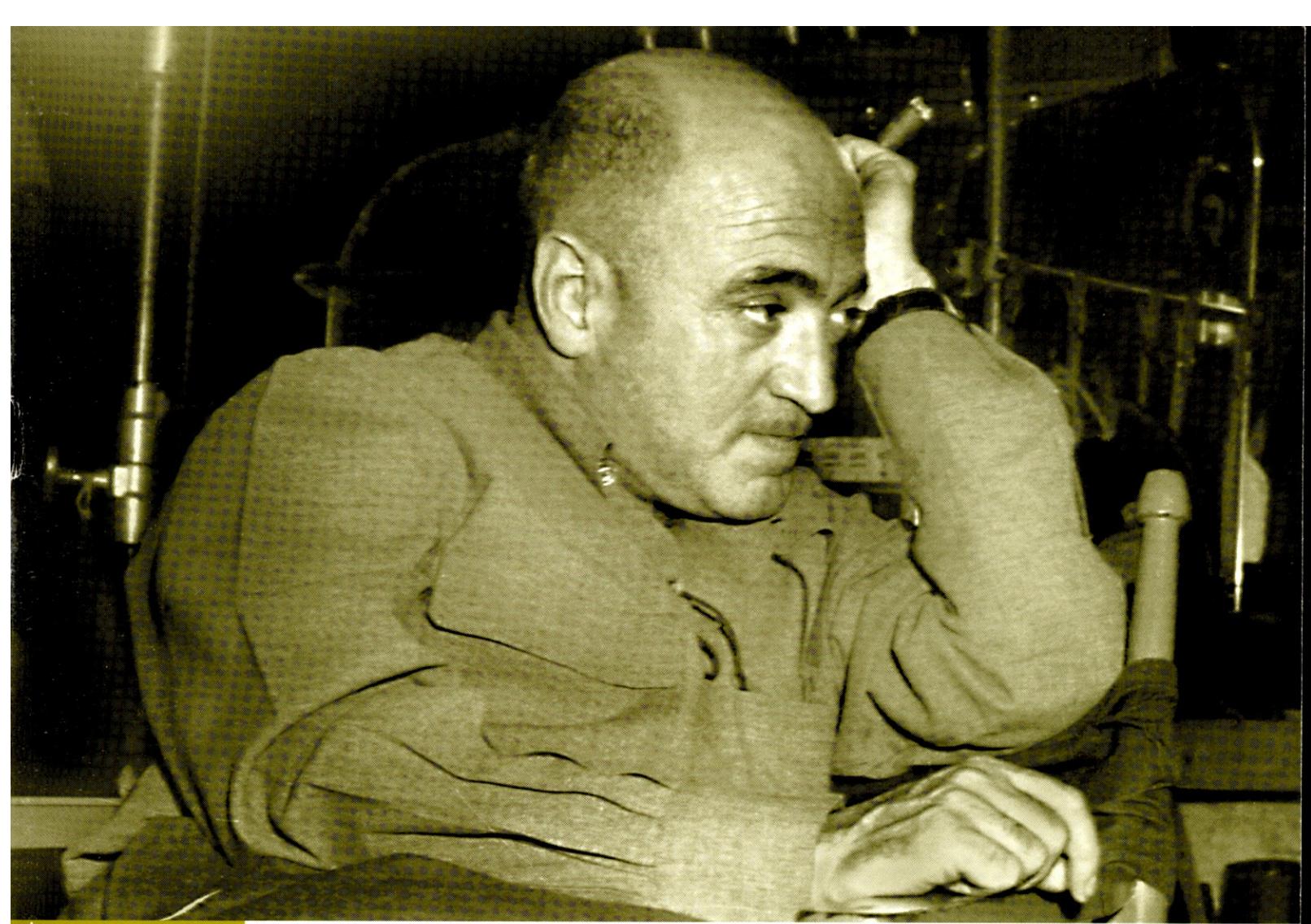
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